Injured and alone. Captured and helpless. Forcefully transformed and stuck in a situation he doesn't understand. Kurogane’s, Fai’s and Syaoran’s time in Cavahall will push them to their limits in more ways than one. Faced with hopeless odds, separated from Mokona and each other, the travelers struggle to reunite before their extended stay in this new world can begin to threaten all of reality.

Notes

For the sake of clarity I just want to point out that this plot is set around four to five years post-TRC, which means that Syaoran is around 18 to 19 years old physically speaking.
Also, this will eventually tie in with the canon events of the TRC manga
Kurogane wandered down the darkening streets, watching people around him hurry about to their homes. No one paused to spare the menacing-looking ninja any attention whatsoever, which suited the Japanese warrior just fine. Cold wind attacked his exposed face and once again he was thankful for the fact that he had been already dressed in winter clothing from the last world they had visited. The weather was not as cold as the previous world, but with the manju once again having dumped the kid and the mage who-knows-where in this world, he was pretty much on his own. He had been on his own for nearly a week now, constantly searching for his companions without much success. He was lucky that the mage had had enough sense of mind to spell his sword back into his arm in case of a scenario just like this, for the world they had arrived in was not quite a pleasant place to be in without some weapon for self-defense.

From what little information he had gathered during his time there, Cavahall was a city divided between two major warring factions. The city had sky scrapers that reached high up into the sky, vanishing out of sight far above the smog-filled skies that rarely ever let any sunlight through. The air was heavy with exhaust fumes, the dark underbelly of the city contrasting sharply with the glitz and glamour broadcasted on the big holo-screens hovering high up above his head, counting down the time limit for some upcoming tournament.

Hearing thunder rumble across the sky, the ninja figured it would be best to wait out the stinging rainfall in the shelter of a bar. If the black, sludge-like rain let up early, maybe he could even head out to look for the others a little longer. The first of the drops began pattering against the littered streets behind him just as Kurogane ducked inside a cramped-looking bar, The Prickly Pan. Pulling out his cred-card- something he’d acquired via gambling on his very first night there- the ninja ordered himself a stiff drink to chase off the cold as he cast a look around.

Random, soot-covered strangers surrounded him, some laughing raucously in their drunkenness while others tried to drink their sorrows away, while others still lay slumped across counters and tables. A pang of irritation and disappointment hit him as he realized that he could not spot the familiar flash of blond nor the brown mop anywhere. Throwing back the amber liquid from the glass of questionable hygiene, the ninja ordered himself another shot as he turned his attention towards the holo-screen mounted on the wall behind the bar.

Promos ran on them in a constant loop from the sponsor of the tournament, an organization called ‘The Company’ which pretty much owned and ran the whole of Cavahall. Except for the parts currently occupied by a rebelling faction known as ‘Liberalists’, though according to the latest news broadcast, another sector of the city had been reclaimed in a recent raid against them. The Company had apparently also acquired several rare ‘Unnaturals’ during the course of this attack. Some bar goers cheered at the news, while others merely shook their heads in disgust and looked away. As the broadcast gave way for some sappy romance movie, people around him began placing bets on who would win the latest tournament.

Kurogane downed his second drink of the night, feeling the liquid burn down his throat as he marveled at the fact that while he could not read the language, he could still understand what was being said around him. A fact that assured the ninja that at the very least, one of his travelling companions was somewhere close by. The range of the manju’s translating abilities had spread quite a bit during the time they’d spent travelling, so he couldn’t be completely sure how near or
far away the thing was. But if he was lucky, maybe the kid or the mage had already met up with it and were looking for the rest of them. As soon as they were all together, they could head off to the next world. After all, a week was normally the maximum amount of time the kid could spend in any particular world before the urge to move on started to overwhelm him. The one time the kid had tried to push his limit and stay a little longer in Clow had not been pleasant for anyone when he’d developed a fever that nearly left him comatose until they finally departed. For the kid’s sake, he sent up a silent prayer that they’d be able to meet up long before it ever came down to something that drastic.

He was on his third glass when the lights flickered and blacked out, followed by the unmistakable sounds of screams and gunfire. The loud conversation inside the bar fell silent so suddenly Kurogane could hear the man sitting next to him gulp in fright. The ninja tried to squint through the glass window to see what was happening outside but the soot and sludge-rain had blackened the panes to opaqueness, making it impossible for him to discern anything.

As quickly as it had begun, the gunfire outside ceased and the last of the screams died down. For a heartbeat, everything was still and then chaos reigned.

The window blew inwards, shooting shards of glass everywhere. Years of training came into play as the ninja flipped off his barstool and behind the counter, pulling the scared-looking bartender down with him as he went. A half-filled glass of alcohol shattered on the ground next to the warrior as the raucous drunk that had been seated next to Kurogane only moments before slumped over the counter, dead. The ninja had not known the man but he could recall him having placed all his possessions on the line for a bet that someone called La Lupa-420 was going to win the tournament once again. Now, as the ninja looked up at his face, his vacant grey eyes stared into thin air, blood beginning to trickle from his parted lips. The backup power source kicked in right then, giving his corpse an eerie wax-like quality in the dull glow that now emanated from a few ancients bulbs on the ceiling.

Tearing his gaze away from the sight, he spared a glance towards the whimpering man curled up on the floor next to him before cautiously peeking out from behind the counter. He took note of the fact that every single customer in the bar was dead, their bodies riddled with shrapnel from the explosion and surprisingly enough, bullet holes. As silently as possible, the ninja brought together his hands and summoned his sword, ignoring the fact that his unusual ability seemed to cause the bartender added distress.

“Stay here and try not to get killed,” he warned the man, slipping over the counter without any effort before dropping to a crouch on the other side. Using the shadows and dead bodies around him for cover, he carefully made his way over to the destroyed window and hazarded a look outside, even as he tried to figure out why The Company would raid Sector 64B, an area already under its control. Unless…had the Liberalists had launched an attack in retaliation to the raid mentioned on the news? But why go after innocent civilians? So far, from what he’d managed to gather about the way these rebels operated- from the gossip and speculations going on around him in the bars and the news on the holo-screens- they normally favored hitting the more posh areas where all the upper-class level bureaucrats and power junkies held property or businesses.

Stealing another look outside, Kurogane noted that the rain and general darkness outside made it hard to make out much apart from a few blurry shapes darting down the streets, the gunfire and screams now sounding a little further away. He decided to wait out the rest of the raid in the relative safety and cover of the now-destroyed, corpse-littered bar and made to banish his sword when a flash of gold darting right by the window made him stiffen. It only took him a fraction of a second to identify the source as Fai before he was racing out into the pouring rain after him. He was careful not to call out the blond’s name and attract unwanted attention to the pair of them, but
he did try and force his legs to move faster to catch up with the swiftly moving magician. For some reason, the blond was moving at vampire speed, rushing straight towards the sounds of gunfire and screaming.

Before Kurogane could do anything to stop him, the blond had rounded the corner and vanished from sight. A second later, something barreled right into him, knocking him into a wall, nearly making him lose his grip on Ginryuu. Shaking his head to clear his vision, the ninja readjusted his grip and only barely managed to block the swipe of vampire claws aimed for his throat before kicking his attacker away. Bringing up Ginryuu in an offensive stance, he struggled to make out the features of his assailant in the gloom. A flash of thunder had his heart leaping to his throat as he caught a glimpse of a familiar face framed by messy, wet bangs. Their lips pulled back in a feral snarl, exposing a set of fangs that the mage had rarely ever displayed except on those cold nights in Infinity when he had forced the magician to drink his blood. But it wasn’t the magician that appeared to want to rip him to shreds. The wild cat-slit eyes that followed his movements predatorily as he readjusted his stance to cater to this new development were never supposed to have been any color apart from gentle, heartwarming amber.

The kid made no motion of having recognized him, darting across the space that separated them in a fraction of a second, forcing Kurogane to twist out of the way to avoid hurting his apprentice.

“Kid!” He yelled, dodging around the brunette’s claws for a third time, “It’s me!”

Still, Syaoran did not seem to recognize him as he kept up the attack, claws swiping through the air fast enough to nick Kurogane’s flesh arm. If Kurogane had thought the boy was feral before, he seemed to be well beyond a mindless animal now as blood welled up from the newly-inflicted wound and the brunette raced towards him with more ferocity than before. Deflecting the assault with a fluid move, Kurogane followed it through with a sharp jab from his metal arm before dropping low to avoid having his face ripped off. The fight was intense but somehow, it lacked the grace Syaoran had developed over the years through endless hours of practice. There was nothing coordinated about his attacks whatsoever, his movements driven completely by mindless, predatorily hunger. But what could have led to him being in a state like this in the first place? Had he perhaps slipped into another coma and the mage had been forced to give him some of his own blood to keep him alive?

Kurogane easily side-stepped the next attack, catching hold of the kid’s forearm before using it and the brunette’s momentum to throw him into an upturned garbage can. Sparing a quick glance around for the mage- in case the blond knew of some better way to subdue the boy- he rushed forward. Driving Ginryuu’s hilt into Syaoran’s temple, Kurogane knocked him out. Still clutching his sword in one hand, he bent over the unconscious boy to check him over. Despite the freezing rain, the brunette was burning up, his breath coming in shallow rattles.

It was a wonder Kurogane had not noticed it before. The kid was running a very high fever. Which was probably why he was completely out of his mind. And why he had been so easy for Kurogane to take down. He supposed the accelerated healing rate must have been slowed down some as well, if the boy was still sick even after being turned. But what in the world had the blond been thinking to even turn the kid in the first place?

Gunshots and shouts rang through the air, the words suddenly completely incomprehensible to the ninja as bright lights shone in their direction. The meat bun must have strayed out of range. Seeing the sword in his hand, no matter how loosely it was being held on to now, caused the newcomers great alarm as guns were instantly pointed at him.

The previous orders were repeated in harsher, angrier tones. Kurogane frowned, readjusting his
grip on Ginryuu as he assessed the situation. These men were under the employment of The Company and the kid now fit the definition of an Unnatural in their eyes. The former made an occupation out of capturing the latter, so that didn't really leave Kurogane with much choice in what he was to do now. He could only hope the mage would show up soon enough to even the odds before things got nasty. Not that he didn’t have faith in his own ability to keep the kid safe. But he did not know how fast Syaoran would wake up and what state of mind he’d be in when he did.

The orders- probably for him to discard his weapon and step away from Syaoran, if their gestures were anything to go by- were repeated for a third time. There was a ring of finality in the silence that followed promising dangerous consequences if he were to disobey. Spreading his feet apart, Kurogane readied his stance, narrowing his eyes as the men exchanged alarmed looks.

“Not a chance in hell.” He spat, darting forwards, relying on his skills- acquired through years of practice at avoiding projectiles- to dodge the bullets fired towards him.

What little he couldn’t dodge, he deflected with Ginryuu’s magically-blessed blade. He was doing rather well at holding his own until reinforcements arrived with faster weapons. He tries not to hiss at the sting as a bullet grazed his side. The rain began to fall harder, making the ground slipperier and more difficult to land on every time he flipped or spun out of the way of an incoming attack.

Soon enough he was pushed to the defensive- a position he had never imagined himself to be in for longer than a couple of seconds. And then he was being forced to retreat as all he could do was deflect bullets so fast his muscles screamed in agony. He could hear a commotion on the other side of the line formed by the reinforcements and could only spare enough thought to pray it was Fai before he focused his attention back to protecting the kid. Another bullet got through his defenses, this one embedding itself deep in the circuitry of his mechanical arm. Although he felt no pain, the arm slowed in its response time, something that cost him dearly when three sharp, tiny somethings punched their way through his gut and chest. He barely had time to gasp as a fourth bullet tore into his shoulder, knocking him off balance. His foot collided with something as he stumbled backwards, sending him sprawling onto his back as Ginryuu slipped out of his grip and rolled away.

He struggled to get back to his feet. He couldn’t let them take the kid! But a sudden numbness spreading out from deep within him made it impossible to move. Something warm bubbled up his throat, leaking from the tiny punctures in his body, burning trails down his rapidly cooling flesh even as the rain kept up its merciless assault.

He had always known that he'd die- one did not become an assassin without acknowledging that truth- but whenever he had pictured it, it had always been in a way where his life had served the purpose of protecting the people he cared about. Now as the sounds of gunfire and thunder and rain began to fade away into his too loud (too raspy) breathing, his only regret was having failed to protect the kid. He heard more yelling, but the words were still impossible to make out. Though that was probably as much a fault of his senses failing him as it could have been him not actually understanding the language. His last thoughts as his body began shut down were a silent apology to the kid and a prayer to the deities to watch over him and the mage before his eyes slid close and he knew no more.
A/N: Things don’t seem too promising for the gang. Anyone wants to guess what could have happened to Syaoran and Fai? And is Kuro dead? And what about Mokona? Free cookies and Mokona-cuddles for everyone who drops me a review. :)

Kurogane-san...

Fire burnt through Kurogane’s veins. He needed air, but...

Help me...

He choked on the thick substance blocking his airway. He couldn't draw in a proper breath.

Please... help me...

Why... where... wha- he clawed at the thing choking him, numb fingers trying to grasp the offensive object as pain registered in his torso.

“Whoa!” Soft hands pushed his pawing fingers away. “Easy there, Steel.”

He tried to resist. There was something in his throat!

“Stop struggling,” a female voice ordered, but he didn't listen. He needed air. Could she not see that?

“I just spent a day and a half struggling on your deathbed to save your life, you stubborn mule!” the woman snapped, “Quit being so difficult!”

He gasped for breath, limbs flailing as he tried to remove whatever had been shoved down his throat, but the woman finally grabbed him and held him down.

“Stop trying to pull it out, you stupid oaf,” she said, letting go of him for the second time, “Do you want to choke to death?”

By now, some distant part of his brain had realized that no, despite the thing jammed down his throat, he hadn’t yet asphyxiated. In fact, his lungs filled with air of their own accord, his body taking in fresh oxygen without having to think about drawing a breath. Calming down a little, he slowly forced his eyelids to part, feeling as though they were weighed down by lead. A flesh-colored blob hovered above him for a moment, disappearing from his line of vision soon after, leaving him staring at a sterile white roof. Something warm flooded his veins, chasing away the burning sensation in his body. The pain from before numbed to a dull throb with each beat of his heart. He finally noticed the steady, mechanical beep that seemed to echo each pulse of pain.

“Feel any better now?” The fleshy blob appeared above him once again, resolving itself into a face, half-concealed by a medical mask. “You scared the hell out of us, you know,” the woman told him as she bent over him to check something. Kurogane only half-listened to what she said, his mind working overtime as it tried to work out his current whereabouts. “From now on, I forbid you to flat-line on me, understood?” She pulled away to give him a stern look. “And doing that twice in a row is definitely out of the question.”

In the brief moments that she held his gaze, Kurogane scanned whatever was visible of the face under the mask to determine who it was. Unfortunately, nothing about the kohl-lined amber eyes or the messy black hair streaked with strands of crimson appeared familiar. The woman behaved as
though she knew him, but he couldn’t recall having ever met her on his journey.

She must have noticed his confused stare, for she grew silent, worry clouding her eyes as she fussed over him some more. “What’s wrong? Does it still hurt?” She turned to look at something outside his field of vision. “Maybe just give the morphine a minute to kick in, all right?” she suggested hesitantly before plowing on as though afraid he might interrupt, “I know you hate that stuff since it dulls the senses,” she pitched her voice to sound manly— an imitation of him, perhaps? “but I really don’t like seeing you in so much pain, Steel. Besides,” Her tone lightened as she stepped away from him, her face crinkling in a smile around the edges of her mask, “Tommy would probably skin me alive for your suffering and we both know you love me too much to let her do something like that.”

Kurogane tried to speak, but thought better of it when his throat screamed in protest. The look on his face must have been an amusing sight for the woman as she giggled, patting his bandaged shoulder.

“Don’t worry. She’s been itching to see you too,” she assured him. “In fact, I’m willing to bet she’s still hovering right outside the door even though I kicked her out yesterday. I’ll go and get her now.” She turned to leave but seemed to think better of it as she whirled around to glower at him. “Don’t you dare try to be macho and get up when she comes in. If you rip anything open after all that hard work I put in, I am so going to stand by and watch you bleed to death.” And then, as though she hadn’t just been giving him a death threat, she turned back, gracefully moving towards the off-white door. Twisting the handle, she pulled it open and stepped through, closing it behind her.

The mechanical beep continued in sync with his heartbeat, allowing Kurogane to deduce it was a pulse monitor of some sort. Letting his gaze wander around the room, he took note of the multitude of machinery piled up around his bed. The clothes he had been wearing for the past week lay in tatters in one corner, right next to a plastic chair. He only got as far as making note of the medicine cabinet installed on the wall above the chair before his attention was drawn back towards the door as it swung open. The woman from before had returned, a pleased grin plastered on her lips now that she had discarded the mask, followed by a face Kurogane would recognize in any dimension. Had he been breathing on his own, it would have hitched as he met that familiar lavender-eyed gaze. As it was, however, the only indication of him being surprised to see the woman here was the slightly faster beeping of the monitor.

“Looks like he’s happy to see you too, Tommy.” The woman chuckled, shutting the door securely behind her once more. “He’s looked better, I suppose, but given the state he was in when we found him, can I just say that I’m probably the greatest healer you could have ever wished for?”

Kurogane only heard the cheerful woman speak with half an ear, the rest of his attention focused on Tomoyo, who stood as if rooted to her spot by the door. A steady stream of silent tears flowed down her face as she stared at him, a million wordless questions flashing through her eyes. She held his gaze for a moment, then threw herself at him, making him hiss in pain as her warm body barreled into his. She was crying openly now, sobs shaking her petite frame as she clung to him.

“Easy with the hugging there, Princess,” the healer reminded Tomoyo, stepping forward to pry her away from him. “Remember what I told you outside? His insides are still knitting themselves back together. We don’t want to risk internal bleeding now that he’s finally out of the woods, do we?” Despite the relief offered to his suddenly pulsating chest, he missed her warmth around him.

Nodding, Tomoyo hurriedly wiped away her tears, sniffling as she glared at him with bloodshot eyes.
“Where the hell have you been all these months?” The fierce display of anger appeared rather out of character for the Tomoyo he had known, and he belatedly realized that this was merely another version of the Tomoyo he knew. “I saw you go down in Sector 74-C. I thought you were- and… you’ve been alive…all this time…” She searched his face for what felt like an eternity before looking away, disappointed with whatever she saw there.

“Why?” she asked softly, refusing to look at him even as Kurogane noticed fresh tears making their way down her face. “Why didn’t you come back here? If you couldn’t have come back… Why didn’t you try to contact anyone? Why didn’t you…” she trailed off, her voice softening, barely audible over the erratic beeping, “contact me…”

_I’m not who you think I am_, he wanted to say, but found it impossible to form words past the tube in his throat, forcing him to settle for staring at her. This Tomoyo had known another version of him. A version that was, by now, most definitely dead because the laws of reality would not have permitted their group to land in that dimension if even one version of them still existed there. It was impossible for two versions of the same soul to exist in a single plane. The man Tomoyo thought she was complaining to was long gone, and here _he_ was, unable to even answer her questions. He made to pull out the breathing tube, wanting to explain, but before he could grab it, the medic effortlessly pulled his hand away with a disapproving frown.

“You’re not in any condition to be pulling that out,” she said, “Tommy can _wait_ a little longer to get those answers from you. She’s waited this long, after all.” The last part was directed towards Tomoyo, who merely gave her a stiff nod.

“Masooma, could you please give him a complete scan?” she requested, turning away from Kurogane as she made her way towards the door. “Now that we know he’s not in danger of—well, now that he’s going to be okay, I think it’s safe to test him for neural implants.”

“Tomoyo... you really don’t think that-” Whatever it was that Masooma thought implausible about the request, Tomoyo calmly cut her off.

“Steel has been missing for _six_ months,” she said, pausing by the exit long enough to cast one last lingering gaze in his direction. “Until he’s capable of telling us where he’s been, it wouldn’t hurt to be safe. Besides,” she added, “he’ll approve of the precautions. Get Nixon to check for any outgoing transmissions on hidden frequencies while you’re at it. We need to be certain he’s clean.”

Masooma hesitated for a moment, glancing between the two of them before sighing as she nodded. The healer walked over to the medical cabinet Kurogane had noticed earlier and fiddled around inside it for a moment, emerging with a needle that contained a sickly-looking orange liquid. Returning to his side, she stuck the needle into the bag of clear fluid that hung above his cot. Kurogane followed the swirling patterns the liquid made as it mixed with the existing fluid that trickled into his veins through the needle stuck in his arm.

Despite having woken up a short while ago, his body began to feel heavy, drowsiness overtaking him as the women discussed why it would be a bad idea to have Cavahall knocking down on their door. He only picked out words like ‘not’, ‘losing,’ and ‘bastards,’ figuring it meant something along the lines of not losing to the Cavahall soldiers. Soon, he was too tired to even keep his eyes open, and Tomoyo’s soft voice and the steady beep lulled him back to sleep.

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“Subject 224 going into shock,” a nurse announced urgently as a convulsing body was rolled down the stark white hallways of the medical wing on a gurney. “Symptoms indicate Neural Implant Rejection. Requesting immediate assistance to stabilize the subject.”
“Prep 224 for immediate surgical procedure,” a cool voice said as the gurney was rolled to a stop near the end of the hallway. Soulless black eyes stared down at the thrashing creature.

“Ma’am?” she asked in confusion. “Despite the rejection, there is still a chance to salvage control on the subject. Why do you-”

“224 is a very rare acquisition,” The speaker cut in sharply. “It is a Magirius Vampirosa.”

Realizing her mistake, the nurse gulped nervously before nodding. If the Director was showing personal interest in the subject, she must have something in mind for it. The Director reached down with a well-manicured nail to trace one side of 224’s face as it twisted in agony. A feral snarl escaped the subject's throat.

“Hybrids of this kind are very hard to come by, harder still to procure in such peak physical condition.” The Director’s soulless eyes turned on the nurse, making the latter stiffen in fear. “There are hardly any of its kind left. It would be very disappointing to see such a perfect specimen die.” She let the words hang in the air for a moment, watching as the poor woman began to quake in her boots. Turning her back to the flailing hybrid, she gave one final warning. “It had better be alive by the end of the day.”

The nurse looked down when the subject snarled, noticing the way sweat had plastered its blond hair to its skin. Its eyes rolled in their sockets, flashing between their usual blue and the Vampirosa gold as the 224 threw its head from side to side. Its breathing hitched, the hybrid’s body arching of the gurney as it struggled against the straps holding it down before it crashed back down. A scream erupted from its throat, claws extending as it fixed its inhuman glare on her. She trembled, transfixed on the spot in fear.

“Please,” she gasped when the creature spoke, “help me.”

She bit her lip, watching as the hybrid’s body went rigid for a fraction of a second before it began having another seizure. A pair of orderlies arrived to assist her, drawing her attention away from 224. Not wanting to discover what unpleasantness awaited her if she were to fail, the nurse pushed the gurney towards the operating room, sending an orderly to fetch the doctor in charge of 224.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So who’s happy I didn’t kill Kurogane? And who can guess 224’s identity? (I know it’s pretty obvious but go on guys, humor me. ;_; ) Oh and in case anyone is wondering, there will be OCs in this story (more than half my plots don’t work without those guys) but I will also be trying out a lot of new things with my writing this time around so you will be seeing AU versions of a lot of canon characters from the manga as well. And! *drum roll please* Mokona will be getting its very own POV slots.
Here’s another chapter for you guys. Just a little note about the timeline of events. Take the very first chapter with Kurogane at the bar as the reference point for when something is happening. I know it can get a little confusing because I’ll be jumping between the present and the week that passed before the starting point. So yeah… keep that in mind when you see the headings for the time. ^^;

Enjoy~

1 Week earlier:

“How many worlds has it been since we last received a welcome like this, Syaoran-kun?” Fai asked as he sprinted down the maze of pristine white hallways with the brunette in tow. Armed soldiers yelled warnings as they gave chase, firing shots after them. Unfazed by the hostile reception, Fai and Syaoran merely took a sharp turn when the corridor split into several paths.

“Not sure, Fai-san,” Syaoran- now nearly a man- responded, skidding to a halt when their way was blocked by even more guards at the other end. Without losing another second, the duo turned on their heels, retracing their footsteps to take a different corridor, which led them to a staircase.

“When did we last land in Rekourt?” They barreled down the stairs, bullets embedding themselves into the walls behind them.

“A month ago, I think,” replied Fai, skipping the last four stairs to land in a graceful crouch. “Those librarians can hold a grudge longer than Kuro-chan,” he complained, a hint of a pout in his tone, “although, technically we did steal their property the last time we were there...” He looked up to see how far behind their pursuers were. Two flights of stairs separated them, giving the magician enough time to take in the rest of their surroundings and figure out their next path. The stairs had led them to a large lobby with imposing, carved pillars stretched out between the tall roof and a dark, glossy, marble floor. Judging from the way it was decorated, it appeared to be a reception area of some sort. A pair of revolving doors marked the sole exit and entry point into the building.

When a bullet missed Syaoran by a hair’s breadth, Fai decided they had dawdled enough. Throwing one last glance over his shoulder at the nearing soldiers, Fai grabbed Syaoran’s arm and sprinted across the slippery floor to reach the exit. Unfortunately, they had to skid to a halt when more armed soldiers began to pile through the exit they had been running toward. Letting go of Syaoran, Fai looked back once again. The guards chasing after them from the upper levels had finally caught up as well, advancing toward them with raised weapons.

“Well,” Syaoran said as he looked around them, spotting more soldiers pouring into the reception area from other parts of the building, all arriving with the intention of cutting off their escape, “this is inconvenient.”

“It’s at times like these I really appreciate Kuro-grumpy lurking over our shoulders,” Fai admitted, feeling less out of breath than Syaoran appeared to be as he scanned their surroundings for any hidden escape routes. “Oh well.” The blond shrugged when he found none. “His absence can’t really be helped, I suppose.” He called on his magic, feeling the familiar power course through his
body to concentrate in the tips of his fingers as he raised his hand, tracing the all-too-familiar Celesian runes through the air. Finishing off his spell with a flourish, Fai lowered his hand, waiting for the letters to do his bidding and clear a path towards the revolving doors for them. To their shock, however, the magical lettering merely hovered in the air for a moment or two before dissipating as though swallowed up by the atmosphere.

“This is new.” He frowned, eyes darting across the tightening circle of soldiers for any weaknesses as he unleashed his vampire claws. Next to him, Syaoran summoned his sword.

"A Magirius Vampirosa?" A cool female voice spoke up from somewhere beyond the ring of soldiers, “And it has a young Magirius with it.” With his enhanced vampire hearing, he could easily make out the gleeful undertones to the woman’s voice. A cold feeling settled in the pit of his stomach as his sixth sense screamed the word danger at him. “I want these specimens alive, gentlemen,” she continued.

The need to get out as soon as possible suddenly overwhelmed Fai, even as he tried and failed to find any weaknesses in the formation surrounding them. He did not know why a mere voice was eliciting such a reaction from his instincts, but he knew better then to question them in such a difficult situation. One of the guards stepped forth, shoulders squared as he pointed his weapon towards them, finger loosely placed on the trigger, though he did not seem inclined to press it just then.

“We will give you one chance to lay down your weapons and come with us quietly,” he said, though his demeanor did little to ease the knots tying themselves in Fai’s gut. Everything about the situation seemed wrong. When neither Syaoran nor Fai made any attempts to take such a generous offer, the man merely shrugged as though he had no qualms about taking them down by force.

“You take the right half and I’ll take the left?” Syaoran suggested in a whisper. Fai chuckled at the suggestion, but they’d been in worse scrapes than this before. They’d find some way to manage it. In fact, it was silly to think he was getting so worked up over a voice. Nodding his assent, they both darted forwards, maneuvering their way past the first few bullets. A part of him wondered why the men were not worried about hitting their own comrades upon missing their intended targets. Fai tried swiping at a few of the soldiers, trying to take out their legs from under them as he dropped to a low crouch, moving as fast as his vampire speed would allow in order to make himself a difficult target to follow.

Syaoran, on the other hand, had no such speed to rely on when a bullet tore through his flesh, ripping a pained scream from his lips as he fell to the ground with a dull thud. The scent of the brunette’s blood was enough cause for Fai to turn around, screaming his companion’s name in alarm and leaving himself open to attack. Even as the boy tried to yell out a warning, several bullets embedded themselves deep within the flesh of Fai’s back. They flooded his system with burning chemicals that dulled his senses so swiftly he was hardly aware of crashing to his knees before the world grew dark.

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The first thing Fai noticed as he came to was that he was lying face down on a hard surface. The second thing he noticed was that he was cold, not because the surface beneath him was cold, but because he seemed to be missing almost all his clothes. Blinking in confusion as he tried to recall the circumstances that had led to this, he tried to sit up. Had he by any chance hit a local bar and gotten so drunk he’d ended up spending the night somewhere he wasn’t supposed to? No, that didn’t feel right. Surely Kurogane would not have let the situation get that out of hand. Besides, he doubted he’d have passed out in such an uncomfortable place without his clothes, even if that had
been the case.

And his movement was limited to mere fidgeting, thanks to the bands of metal clasped around his wrists and ankles.

Hearing a rustle of fabric, Fai turned his head, facing what appeared to be a man’s back. He could hear the occasional chink of glass against metal, making him wonder just what his captor was up to, probably having not yet realized he was awake. Fai carefully tested his restraints, realizing with a faint pang of disappointment that he couldn’t break through the metal chaining him down. There was nothing more than the man’s back in the mage’s field of vision, leaving him unable to assess the situation. All he could tell was that he was being held against his will in a vulnerable and potentially dangerous situation.

He still couldn’t recall enough of what happened earlier, but he was able to conclude that he and Syaoran had been trying to escape and had been captured before they could make it to safety. He closed his eyes and forced his muscles to relax, feigning unconsciousness when he felt the other man start to turn towards him.

Something beeped and hissed as a pair of heels clacked their way across the floor towards him. Relying on the sound of the footsteps as they approached him, Fai guessed that the door was merely three feet away from where he lay—a short distance to bolt across when he finally managed to free himself from his confinement.

“What have you to report, Doctor?” the woman asked. It took Fai a moment to recognize the voice: the woman from the lobby where they’d been captured.

“The specimen physically appears to be of twenty and three years of age,” the doctor said. “It’s impossible to deduce the creature’s true age—always is with this particular species—but there appears to be some faint scarring around his left eye. Fortunately, it’s near impossible to see unless in the correct light.”

“I suppose that is to be expected, with its accelerated healing,” the woman hummed in response. “Have you altered the protocols for it?” Fai felt her hands brush some hair back from his face. “Quite a pretty specimen, this one is.” Had Fai not been faking his sleep, he was sure he would have been sputtering in indignation at being called pretty. Since he could not do that, he forced himself to pay attention to what was being said. “Is it suitably prepared for the procedure?”

“Of course,” the doctor said. “We have found that the implants take better when they’re installed in a conscious subject as opposed to one that is put under for the duration. I have already factored in the accelerated healing and recalibrated the instruments. Now all that needs doing is for the subject to regain consciousness.”

“Perhaps a shock or two might quicken the process,” she suggested lightly.

Fai tried not to give himself away by reacting too soon when he heard that, but as something small and crackling and absolutely smoldering was pressed against his back, he couldn’t help but scream in pain, his body thrashing.

“See, doctor? Simple, and yet, effective.” The woman simpered as Fai shuddered and panted where he lay. The small burn on his back began to mend itself as his healing kicked in, giving him a small respite from the pain. Brushing her fingers against his skin, she continued. “And we don’t even have to worry about leaving behind any scars.”

“Indeed,” the man agreed gleefully as Fai opened his eyes to shoot the man a dirty look. His anger
turned to shock when he realized how similar the man was in appearance to Kyle Rondart. He had the same pale skin, the same brown eyes. Even his long black hair was pulled back in the same way as the doctor from Jade. If he didn’t know any better, Fai would have thought it to be the same man, but that man had been the result of an experiment. Perhaps this was one of the originals? That line of thought didn’t keep him occupied for long as he remembered his situation. His irritation and anger at his mistreatment returned twofold now that he knew the identity of one of his captors.

“Is this the way you treat all of your guests?” he said, managing to keep his tone light despite the severity of the situation as he pulled at his bonds once again in an attempt to weaken them. He hazarded a glance toward the woman, wondering if she was another copy, but nothing about her struck him as even vaguely familiar.

“Oh, good, it’s capable of intelligent speech.” The woman clasped her hands together in interest as she leaned over him. Her pale hair brushed over his exposed skin, sending an involuntary shudder down his spine as her heavy-lidded dark eyes raked up and down his body. “I wonder what else it’s capable of.”

“Any particular reason why I’m being referred to as an it?” he questioned, pulling on the shackles a little harder as he craned his neck off the platform and cast a look around. Kyle’s lookalike was fiddling with something set out on a table a couple of feet away. Glass clinked against metal as Fai strained his ears to make out what he was up to.

They both ignored him as Kyle turned back around, pushing the table closer to the platform as the woman stepped back. From where he was lying, it was impossible for Fai to make out what was laid out on the table, but the doctor did grab a cotton swab from it before turning towards him. From the strong smell that wafted off of it, the mage guessed it had been dipped in some sort of alcohol. The man pushed down on the back of his head, forcefully pressing Fai’s cheek against the metal table as he used the cotton to rub a patch of skin at the base of his neck, right on top of one of the ridges of his spine.

“What are you doing?” Fai grunted, struggling against the hand holding his head down, but with his limbs shackled, it wasn’t of much use. Kyle didn’t reply as he half-turned towards the table to discard the cotton and pick up something else that Fai couldn’t quite make out.

“Initialize the laser scalpel,” Kyle ordered to no one in particular.

Laser Scalpel Initializing, an automated voice announced. Fai heard the faint whir of something mechanical move into position above him.

“Wait a minute.” Fai tugged at his bonds a little more insistently. “Can’t we just talk about this firs-Argh!” He screamed as a sharp, burning sensation assaulted the skin on his back. The stench of burning flesh reached his nose as the laser cut through and cauterized his wound on the same time, heading downwards. Tears pricked his eyes as he felt the top of the wound seal shut, but before he could mend a single muscle, the scalpel was back to deepen the cut. He jerked and thrashed, biting down on his next scream as he focused his energy on trying to break free. Whatever it was that these people had in mind for him, he did not want to let them finish with it. Worse, they probably had Syaoran, too. He had to get out and find the boy before he was subjected to something equally insane.

Despite his efforts to keep his cries contained, another scream escaped his lips as the doctor pulled his wound open wider, using something sharp and painful to keep the flesh peeled apart, exposing his spine. The hand holding his head down did not falter, despite all his struggling, and the bastard calmly conversed with the woman about the weather of all things as he went about hurting him.

The taste of iron (his blood!) filled his mouth, a snarl forming in his throat when the doctor
mercilessly assaulted the back of his neck.

A part of him wondered why he was still awake. Most men would have passed out from the pain long ago, but, most men would have ended up dead upon having their eye ripped out from its socket as well. His body kept trying to heal itself, but the laser scalpel and clips Kyle had used to keep the wound open were doing their job spectacularly. He could feel a cold, metallic something poke at his spine and his breath hitched. The doctor was poking at his spine!

And oh, Kerkés, it hurt!

Compared to the burning laser against his flesh, this pain was near freezing in its intensity, hundreds and hundreds of tiny, icy claws grabbing at individual nerves, forging connections that were not meant to be there, and it felt so wrong. But there was nothing he could do to stop it because he was forced down on a metal table, and he couldn’t move, and it hurt, and he couldn’t feel his arms or his legs or anything else in his body except for the pain, and he was vaguely aware of screaming as the taste of blood rose up in his throat.

And then, as soon as it had begun, the cold was gone. A heartbeat later, the burning vanished, and his flesh started knitting itself back together, but he knew something was still wrong because all his senses told him there was something inside him that was not supposed to be there. But he couldn’t move to pull it out and his muscles were closing up over it and then... it was over.

He gasped for breath, his whole body shuddering as his senses began to spread outwards. When had he blacked out? His vision slowly returned and he noticed that there was blood pooled on the table around his head. His sense of hearing slowly focused itself on the world around him and he realized that the woman was congratulating the doctor on another successful procedure. There had been others?

He heard four distinctive clicks, the bonds on his wrists and ankles coming undone, but his body had no strength left to take advantage of his freedom. So he remained slumped where he was. This whole situation was turning out to be a horrible parody of the events in Acid Tokyo where he had been turned into a vampire against his will. And now, once again, something had been done to him without his consent, and he was too weak to do anything about it.

“Akira wants the specimen ready for primary trials no later than tonight,” the woman said.

“That should not be much of a problem,” the doctor replied. “It seems to be acclimating to the implant quite well. Would you like to test it out?”

“It looks exhausted,” the woman said. “Is it wise to activate the implant so soon?”

“With healing like that,” Kyle pointed to his back, “there’s very little that could permanently damage it.”

“Very well, then,” she said, sounding a little too eager as she heard her footsteps approach him. Kyle handed her a small black device. It was a nearly-flat square, nondescript in appearance, but as soon as she pressed her thumb onto its surface, a surge of electricity traveled through Fai’s spine. Everything seemed so far, far away suddenly as his arms pushed against the surface of the table and he sat upright. He could see the hunger in her gaze as she looked at him, but it felt as though he was looking at her through the eyes of someone else. When she spoke, her words filtered into his brain in a similar manner.

“224, do you copy?”
224? Was that what he was called? It had to be, because she was looking at him, expecting an answer. His gaze traveled down to his pale, long-fingered hands. His designation was 224. And he had been asked a question. Looking back up to meet her gaze, he tested out the words that he somehow knew were the right answer.

“224, reporting.”

Slowly, the expectant look on the woman’s face morphed into a smile.

“Perfect.”
Change

Akira watched the subject spar against five of their soldiers, managing to continue holding its own against them rather efficiently, just as he had for the past hour. She had been testing its limits in a manner quite similar to the *Magirius Vampirosa* hybrid, but this specimen had not yet been fitted in with the neural implants. Instead of the implants, it was being kept in check by the standard shock collars. Most of the Unnaturals were fitted with those during their early months at the facility. As head of the Research & Development branch at The Company, she did not often personally test the subjects, but this particular pair had caught her attention.

So far, 224, the hybrid, was performing much better than expected. The implants had ensured perfect obedience. The vampire's strength and agility coupled with its powerful magic made for a rather fascinating test subject. It was far more robust than its wiry frame suggested. Those enchanting blue eyes and effeminate features made it pleasing enough to the eye. She had even heard rumors about the possibility of it being passed over to the Pleasure Program after Akira was done with it. However, despite its prettiness, Akira felt 224 would be far more suited as a field operative.

The younger apprentice- no doubt being groomed to be turned at some later stage in its life- was a whole other story. It appeared to be quite attached to the hybrid mentor and kept demanding that it be allowed to see 224. Akira had decided she would eventually grant that request, but she had deemed the brunette her special project. Once she was done testing its limits, she would let it meet 224, and then... and then she would study the young apprentice some more.

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Syaoran paced inside his tiny prison, the room he'd been brought to at the end of the past three days. His hand strayed towards the metal collar clasped around his neck as he shot an irritated look towards the security camera in the corner. These people, whoever they were, had not only taken him and Fai prisoner but had had the nerve to label himself and his companion as their property. Apparently, the definition of human was a lot more limited in this world than any other they had visited.

The first day, he'd woken up in that tiny cell, unbound and unharmed except for that collar around his neck. Syaoran had tried to escape, calling on his magic to blast his way out but the collar had sent bolts of electricity surging through his system, leaving him in a panting heap on the floor for the next half hour.

He grudgingly admitted it was one effective way to keep him from using magic, for he had not tried it again since the shock.

Every day, a stoic pair of guards would come to fetch him from his room and lead him down a maze of pristine white hallways that smelled impossibly clean. At the end of his journey, a woman dressed in a professional-looking skirt and blouse hidden partially by a white lab coat waited for him. She was the only one who ever spoke to him in this place, but she was far from pleasant. Everything about her, from her impassive brown-eyed stare to the dark hair pulled back in a bun and the cold, clinical manner of speaking, screamed *wrong*. He had tried asking about Fai every chance he got, but she rarely answered his questions except to probe for further information about him and his master. The woman was apparently under the impression that he was Fai's apprentice, and that he was intended to be turned into a vampire in the future.

The first time she had let it out, he had tried to correct her that Fai was merely a friend and no such
transformations awaited him, but she did not listen. From the way she addressed him and spoke about Fai, as though they were not even human beings, did little to endear her to Syaoran. But even if she had been perfectly polite and spoke to them both nicely, Syaoran knew he would strongly dislike, if not outright hate her for the way she forced him to demonstrate his skills. The collar did more than discourage him from using magic. It could also be used to coerce him into obeying her. So far, the list of tests included running on a treadmill at his top speed for over two hours, followed directly by demonstrating his magic in a controlled environment. He had even been pitted against as many as five trained soldiers that would have dwarfed even Kurogane in size.

And every time he did not perform up to her expected standards, the collar would zap him. The shock would be strong enough to knock him to the ground, leaving him panting for breath. And he would be expected to pick right up and continue trying to kill himself by doing whatever impossible tasks she assigned him. It might have been tolerable if, at the end of the day, he could have gotten some word about Fai from her, but the woman remained tight-lipped whenever he brought up the subject.

Even though it had only been three days, Syaoran was reaching the limit of his tolerance. Trapped as a test subject at some inhumane laboratory, he had no idea what was happening to Fai. He had no idea where Kurogane and Mokona were, or even if they were together. Worse still, he could not think of a single way to get himself out of the situation or get word out to his mentor to come to their aid. He could only hope that Fai was having better luck at dealing with this situation and had figured out some way to get them out because Syaoran wasn't sure how much longer he could last. And even though it had not yet begun, any day now the constant insistent tug which marked the limit of time he could spend in any given world would begin to attack him. And then, when he couldn't leave, the tug would resolve into a pounding headache, which would morph into a fever that would leave him comatose. He dared not try to think what would happen to him if it went any further than that.

He had to find some way to get out of there before it became a problem, but... he just couldn't think straight anymore. Not with the constant worry over his companions' safety and health niggling at him like a persistent itch and the threat of his imminent doom hanging over his head like a sword. Not to mention the fact that the female scientist was fully intent on forcing him well beyond his body's limits before the day had even begun. He wasn't quite sure when it happened, but somewhere between his pacing, worrying, and failed plotting, he fell asleep.

On the morning of his fourth day there, he was woken by the familiar tug that urged him to move to the next world. But with no Mokona around and no means to reach the dimension hopper, he merely curled up in a ball and dreaded the unpleasant day that awaited him.

Hours passed, and somewhere along the way as he waited miserably for his daily heralds to arrive, he fell back into an uneasy sleep that was filled with images of his companions all withering away into ashes. He shot upright, calling out Sakura's name as she crumbled into dust, when the door to his cell beeped. Wide-eyed and confused about his surroundings, he turned his head towards the door as it hissed and slid to one side. Surprisingly, it wasn't the pair of mute guards that came through the door, but Fai.

Letting out a relieved sigh, Syaoran smiled, clambering to his feet as he hurried over to the blond.
"Fai-san!" he exclaimed. "I'm so glad you're okay. I was so worried about you when..." He trailed off, stopping a couple feet away from the magician when he noticed blonde's militaristic posture. The magician's hair was cut, shorter even than the length it had been when Syaoran had first seen him at Yuuko's shop. "Fai-san," he said carefully, "are you all right?"
The blond did not reply, though he did take a step towards Syaoran.

"Fai-san?" he asked hesitantly, taking a step back when the magician began extending his claws. Before Syaoran could figure out what was happening, Fai had grabbed him by the arm and swung him around like a ragdoll. The wind was knocked right out of him as he slammed into the concrete wall. Syaoran shook his head, trying to get rid of the stars dancing across his vision as something warm and wet trickled down the back of his skull. His head throbbed as he struggled to sit up, confused as to why Fai would just attack him like that. Unless...the conclusion fled from his grasp when he caught sight of a pair of emotionless golden eyes staring down. He shivered, reminded of his clone's mismatched stare in Tokyo.

A piercing pain erupted from five different points in his chest. He choked on a scream as his gaze shot downwards. Fai’s claws were sunk all the way into his ribs; he could feel their tips emerging out from the other side of his back. Blood bubbled up in his throat as his damaged lungs and heart began to give out. The edges of his vision began to turn to grey as the blond retracted his hand and let him fall to the ground. He was dimly aware of gasping for breath when something warm and wet was pressed to his lips. A tangy, iron-scented liquid trickled down his throat like fire, burning his insides as it worked its way through his body.

He thrashed, choking on the blood. He's turning me... was the last coherent thought he had before the pain of the transformation became too much. He screamed.

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"Quite a macabre transformation," Akira remarked to the doctor beside her, impassively watching the scene in holding cell 3k26. 224 had just impaled its young apprentice on its claws and then fed the latter its blood to trigger the process. "I hope you were taking notes, Doctor. I'm afraid I won't be allowing 224 to trigger any further transformations until I have tested its capabilities to my full satisfaction."

"Of course." The bespectacled man inclined his head. "Should I schedule its apprentice for implants as well? The new design seems to be working quite well for the hybrid."

"Do it." She nodded. "The Director would like me like to test them both in the field next week. We have received information that the Liberalists are planning an infiltration in sector 64-B."

"Downtown districts have always been more susceptible to their kind," the doctor agreed. "No one important lives there, but I suspect a few casualties might work out in our favor. Who knows, I might even be able to procure some new subjects."

"As long as nothing gets traced back to The Company," Akira said, turning her gaze back to the monitor. 224 watched its apprentice as the latter screamed. "I wonder... Doctor, do you think you can relinquish control back to 224 for a while? I want to see how it reacts to its apprentice's transformation."

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Fai could remember each and every single moment his body had not been under his control. He could remember screaming and bashing mentally against the invisible barrier that kept him from controlling his own actions. Could remember the fear and horror he had felt upon receiving his latest orders. Could remember every single useless attempt he'd made to stop himself from carrying them out. But he was nothing but a prisoner inside his own body, helpless to watch as he struck Syaoran down, watch the shock and betrayal flash across his face as Fai pulled out his claws and forced his tainted blood down the boy's throat.
And then, as he was helplessly standing by and watching the boy scream and thrash, the strings controlling him vanished. The sudden control of his body was so unexpected, it disoriented him enough to send him crashing to his knees next to Syaoran.

"Syaoran-kun, I'm so sorry," he said, reaching out for the boy before thinking better of it and withdrawing his hand. Syaoran's back arched off the floor as he screamed and screamed and screamed. His limbs flailed, eyes wide open and flashing between their natural amber and the vampire gold. "I'm so, so sorry."

Syaoran appeared either not to have heard him or not to care about the meaningless apologies. One of his flailing limbs hit the floor with a distinctive snap as the bone broke, and Fai shot forward to grab the boy before he could harm himself further. The pain of the transformation seemed to have loaned him some hidden strength as he fought against Fai. His lengthening nails dug into the blonde's flesh, and Fai had to wonder if his own transformation had looked as painful as Syaoran's appeared to be.

It took a long while, but slowly Syaoran's wounds began to close up, blood still leaking from the holes but finally the boy had exhausted himself. His screams and struggles subsided to whimpers and weak twitches, though Fai dared not loosen his grip, fearing a relapse. However, when a sufficient amount of time had gone by, he let go, watching Syaoran for a repeat performance. There was none.

The last of his wounds- including the broken arm- healed up and tired golden eyes looked up at him.

"Syaoran-kun." Fai was vaguely aware of the tears trailing down his cheeks as he looked at the boy. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" Syaoran rasped. His newly transformed body must not have been able to handle the exhaustion, for he passed out before Fai could answer.

Fai remembered halfheartedly wiping at the tears, but before he could do anything to make the brunette comfortable, his consciousness was thrown back in the invisible prison. Recalling his orders from before, he gave the boy one last look before getting back on his feet and heading back out the way he had come, his body once more a puppet for the unseen strings.

Behind him, the door slid closed with a decisive hiss.
2 Days Ago:

Ryuuh glowered at the guard that prodded his side with a stungun. With his hands shackled behind his back, he had no possible way of getting hold of the weapon. Grudgingly, he picked up the pace, but only enough to keep the guard happy. He wasn't about to tire himself out by jogging down the corridors when he could walk. He had been captured by the Company's soldiers during a raid in one of the downtown sectors last month. He wasn't a high ranking official in the Rebellion's chain of command. He had figured they'd just finish him off once they learned how worthless he was and dump his body in the sewers. That was the standard protocol for these guys.

So, he was a little surprised when after the initial questioning, instead of being led to a firing squad, he had instead been locked up in a cell and left alone. It was stranger still to have been provided with some sort of foul-tasting green sludge that served as food and a cup of water twice daily. Ryuuh had been running reconnaissance for the Liberalists for three years, and the Company’s current attitude towards him did not seem to add up. Unless, of course, they were keeping him around as a potential test subject. He shuddered at that thought, finally hurrying up when the guard nudged him again. He sent up a silent prayer that they would be leading him to the firing squad. Becoming a test subject for The Company was not at the top of his 'ways I want to die' list. He would've much preferred being torn to bits by hungry chimeras or perhaps, mountain wolves.

It came as a bit of a surprise to him when, in the end, he was made to stop before a nondescript door, the same as all the others lining that hallway, and the shackles were removed as one of the guards stepped forth to enter the passcode. The second kept his gun pressed against Ryuuh's back. The lock beeped in confirmation before the door slid aside with a mechanical hiss. The guard prodded him forwards. Looking in from the entrance, Ryuuh noticed that the cell was small, three-by-four feet in floor space, and stark white except for the odd dark brown splatters. And it was occupied by a trembling person sitting in the corner with his back facing the door.

The person must have noticed his arrival because he finally looked over his shoulder, a tiny wail escaping his lips before he turned back to the corner and started muttering something too fast for Ryuuh to discern.

"Get on with it," grunted the guard behind him and pushed him inside just as his fellow guard grabbed Ryuuh's arm and slashed the inside of his forearm with a knife. The guard with the gun shoved him inside and closed the door. The cut wasn't deep enough to do any serious harm, but it did sting. The prisoner in the corner stiffened the minute the door was closed and Ryuuh cautiously made to approach him.

"Stay away!" the boy, barely old enough to be considered a man, cried. Ryuuh froze where he stood.

"Relax," he said, looking around the small room and noticing two cameras hanging from the corners. "I'm not going to hurt you," he promised, modulating his voice to sound as non-threatening as possible.

"H-Hurt me?" the prisoner repeated in disbelief. "You think... you think you're going to hurt me?" He laughed harshly. "You have no idea what you've walked into."

Ryuuh felt his breathing hitch, a cold feeling of dread washing over him.
"You're bleeding." The prisoner gasped, going still for a moment before curling in on himself as he rocked back and forth. "Not again. Not again. Please, no," he moaned, keeping up the rocking motion as he did so.

"Hey," he said, worrying for the prisoner's sanity as he took another careful step in his direction, "are you okay?"

"I told you to stay away!" he barked so suddenly that Ryuuoh jumped back, "It's not safe. I'm not safe. You should talk. Talking helps. It's distracting. Talking needs focus. Attention." His voice dropped to a mutter. Ryuuoh wasn't sure what they had done to this poor guy, but he could only pray he wouldn't end up like him. "Keep talking," the prisoner repeated, a hint of urgency to his tone now. "It's easier to ignore things that way. It helps with the bells, too," he murmured.

"Bells?" Ryuuoh repeated, puzzled. There was no other sound except for the unnamed prisoner talking.

"They ring from castle towers," he explained as though it should have been obvious. "They keep on ringing. Telling me to go. Telling me to leave. But I can't." He whimpered, clutching his head, "Before, it was only headaches. I could never hear the bells. But now... it's all I hear. It's time to go. Time to leave. But I'm trapped and there's no way out." Another chill went down Ryuuoh's spine. He took a step back, colliding with the metal door. What was going on here?

"Talk!" the prisoner growled.

"I-I..." He cleared his throat. Something was very wrong. What had they done to this guy?
"I'm Ryuuoh. What's your name?"

"Syaoran..." he replied, keeping his back turned towards Ryuuoh.

"How did you get caught?"

"I don't know." Syaoran whimpered, shaking his head as he began muttering to himself again, "No, no, no. I'm stronger than this. I can't give in. I can't... Not again. Not again." His whispers became inaudible, leaving Ryuuoh confused and a little afraid. The silence hung between them for quite a while. And then, so quickly he barely caught it, Syaoran went rigid before finally turning around to face him. Ryuuoh's heart dropped into his stomach as the guards' reasons for bringing him to this cell became clear.

"You should have kept talking," Syaoran hissed, hungry cat-like eyes boring into his.

Ryuuoh's scream died before it could escape his lips. A pair of fangs pierced through the skin of his neck, easily ripping through muscle as warm blood gushed out of the injury. His hands shot upwards to pull the prisoner off, but Syaoran batted his hands away. Blood flowed down his skin in rivulets, though most of it was lapped up by the vampire feeding on him. His heart began to flutter and his struggles weakened. Ryuuoh wondered if 'death by vampire' had ever made it to his list of preferred methods to die.

As his world began to dim and darken, a part of him answered that, no, the thought had never crossed his mind.

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The bells were too loud. Far, far too loud. As though he were standing right beneath them in the castle towers as they rang.
Syaoran should not have been able to hear anything past them. He knew he should not have, and yet he could hear everything else just fine. A little too well, in fact.

Ever since he had woken up after his transformation (Fai didn't really meant to do it. He apologized, didn't he?) everything was clearer. Louder. Different.

He dropped the lifeless body of his prey. (Ryuuh. That was Ryuuh!) He wasn't sure why he couldn't control his hunger. Fai had been so in control of himself after his transformation. Why couldn't he control himself the same way? If Fai had taken to draining his prey like Syaoran had, the mage would have been dead within a week.

What was wrong with him?

He knew that they were people. Living, breathing human beings with lives and families and friends. And yet, whenever one was brought to his cell, all he could hear was the blood rushing through their veins. The hearts thrumming in their chests. The guards always made them bleed. Made it harder for him to resist. And the ringing bells made it harder to concentrate. The coppery scent always drowned him. In the end, no matter how hard he tried to resist, he became the monster that thought of those living, breathing people as nothing more than prey. His prey.

And the blood. It always sang to him. Called out to him like a siren, adding to the cacophony of the bells. He had to leave. Get out. But he was trapped. And he didn't know where any of the others were.

Was Kurogane okay? Was he trapped in this hell somewhere with him? Or was he out there somewhere, looking for them? Was Mokona with him? And Fai... something had happened to Fai. He would never have attacked him otherwise. And why would he have turned him into a vampire? Fai had hated being turned. Resented Kurogane for forcing vampirism on him. He'd never do something like that to Syaoran.

Would he?

There had to be an explanation for his actions. Fai was not one to betray his trust like that. Fai was his friend. And he cared about him. There had to be something else.

But how was Syaoran supposed to deal with this?

His gaze traveled to the unmoving figure on the floor, and despite his best efforts, a sob spilled from his lips. Four people. He had murdered four people in two days. He staggered back, colliding with the cold wall, sliding down to the floor as he pulled up his knees and wrapped his arms around them. He was a murderer.

How did Kurogane handle the guilt? He had killed so many. That was why he'd been sent away in the first place. But he could function like a normal person. Why did the ninja not crumble under the weight of the guilt that was threatening to crush Syaoran? Didn't he have a heart?

But no, of course he had a heart. He had people he cared about. One couldn't care for someone if one lacked a heart. Syaoran had killed because he could not control the hunger.

Burying his face in his knees, he let the tears fall freely from his face as he tried not to imagine the sightless green eyes of his latest victim. He had no control. And he couldn't stop killing. He was turning into a monster. No. He was a monster.

Closing his eyes, he cried as the invisible bells urging him to leave rang incessantly.
Mokona did not like being lost. It also did not like being dirty or cold or hungry. But the dimension hopper was lost and dirty and cold and hungry as it wandered through the streets of the city. Mokona had jumped between dimensions like it had countless times before, but something had gone wrong this time, and it had landed in this new world far, far away from its friends.

At first Mokona did not worry because it trusted Fai and Syaoran and Kurogane to find Mokona. And then they could look around for clues to restore Syaoran and Sakura's bodies and leave together when the time came. But five days had gone by and Mokona was still on its own in this world. The dimension hopper did not like this new world at all. It was cold and it was always raining and the streets were filthy and no one cared about Mokona at all.

The first night there, Mokona had tried asking a pretty bakery owner for some food and a place to spend the night. She had only screamed and chased Mokona out with a broom, yelling for guards to capture the freaky talking unnatural-thing. Mokona did not like being called an unnatural-thing. Mokona was Mokona. And Mokona was not freaky at all. But when the big, scary men with guns and nets had arrived, Mokona had bounced away and hid behind discarded storage containers a few streets away. After that incident, it did not try asking anyone for help, staying hidden from sight and searching for the others on its own.

Mokona always stored away some food in the dimensional pocket where it stored everything else, so at first when it grew hungry, Mokona simply took some food from there. But yesterday, the dimension hopper had run out of all the food it had stored and now it felt miserable. Worse still, Mokona's earring had started to glow. Their time in that world was up and there was no sign of Syaoran or the others. Mokona had tried to take everyone away like it had in Shura and Shara but Mokona could not find Syaoran and Fai. Something blocked them from Mokona's magic. Mokona was too far away from Fai and Syaoran to take them away from that world. Something like this had never happened before.

Worry gnawed at its insides at that. What if Mokona could not find the others in time and Syaoran grew sick again? The price would begin to take its toll on Syaoran and then...bad things would happen to him.

As the dimension hopper peeked out from behind a garbage bin, looking at the people hurrying by in the street, it could only pray that they would all meet up soon. Nobody paid Mokona any attention as it approached the mouth of the alleyway. It had always liked attention, but for once Mokona was glad that no one noticed it.

Commercials and messages ran on loops on big holograms projected from skyscrapers. Thunder rumbled high up in the sky somewhere, and Mokona whimpered. It did not want to be wet on top of being cold and hungry.

Over the course of the previous five days, Mokona had drifted from its starting point to the seedier districts of the city. The skyscrapers became less polished in these parts, and shady shops sprung up at every corner. The sidewalks were almost always half-blocked by stalls selling knickknacks or various everyday items. At times, some stalls would sell food as well. Pretty much every stall had a holographic projection hovering above it, advertising its products, and people would sometimes stop to buy something. Mokona looked around, trying to ignore its hunger as it searched the crowd for a familiar face, ears drooping when nameless strangers hurried by without sparing the strange white-furred creature any mind.

Stubby paws dragging, Mokona stuck close to the side of the sidewalk, not wanting to be stepped on as it trudged along. The delicious aroma of baked cinnamon buns wafted down to Mokona from
one stall as the dimension hopper passed by it, freezing the creature in its steps. Turning around slowly, it eyed the stand, loaded to the brim with food. Looking around, Mokona wondered if maybe it could get away with swiping one of the buns for itself. Would the stall-owner, a port-bellied man in his early fifties by the looks of it, call the scary guards to capture Mokona?

An earth-jarring bout of thunder rumbled overhead, startling the man enough to make him knock one of the buns to the ground. Grumbling to himself, man bent down to pick it up, then noticed the dirt sticking to one side of the bread. With an exasperated huff, the man threw it over his shoulder towards a nearby alley. Without wasting another second, Mokona darted after the food, hoping it could get to it before an alley cat claimed the bun for itself. Luckily enough, the bun hadn't rolled too deep into the passageway, so Mokona managed to grab it. Breathing in the delicious scent, Mokona sighed in gratitude, gobbling it up in less than a minute.

Though it had not been enough to completely fill Mokona up, the dimension hopper felt just a little better after eating. Comforted by the food, Mokona once again head back out into the streets, resuming its search.
Warning

Present:

Ryanban fiddled with his tie as he waited for the lift to arrive. Rain splattered against the windows, trailing down the glass in rivulets as thunder rolled across the heavens. Despite the air-conditioning, sweat beaded his brow as he thought about the summons he had just received. The Director had asked him to come up to her office. He grit his teeth, jabbing the elevator button as his mind came up with various scenarios to explain why she might have done so. The only thing he could think of in the end was the fiasco that had been the raid on sector 64-B.

The lift arrived and he stepped inside, automatically pressing the button marked L3, short for Level 3. L3 held the offices for Sales and Procurement of Unnaturals. This level was also where the Board of Directors and other senior members of The Company's chain of command sat. Ryanban was the head of Security. His office was on L4, one level below L3 owing to the fact that he had to deal with the Departments for Public Relations and Marketing, which were also on L4.

Digging out a handkerchief from the inner pocket of his jacket, he wiped the sweat off his forehead and shoved the cloth back in his jacket when the lift stopped and the doors parted with a soft 'ding'. He barely glanced at The Company's holographic logo—a black and white interwoven cursive TC—that was proudly displayed in the lobby as he hurried towards his destination. Dread twisted his stomach into knots, but he knew better than to keep The Director waiting. As beautiful as she might be, Director Bia was not a patient woman, as many employees had learned the hard way. Pausing outside her door, he took in a breath to steel his nerves before giving a firm knock.

"Come in."

"You wanted to see me?" he said as he stepped inside.

"Ah, Ryanban, yes. Come in, come in." Director Bia smiled, beckoning him with her left hand as she used her right to flick through a report. "Take a seat. I'll be with you in a moment."

Ryanban walked over and sat down, the soft leather-covered cushions nearly swallowing his heavy frame. Resisting the urge to fidget, he tried to make out what the subject of the report was, as the Director continued reading from her holographic screen. His heart took a plunge when he realized that the report covered the latest raid. He clenched his fists in his lap as Bia's smile morphed into a cruel smirk. She had probably already read the report before she called for him. This was all just for show. After all, the bitch liked watching people squirm. And judging from the way her cold eyes glittered, she was enjoying herself even then.

Outside, thunder crashed, rattling the floor to ceiling window behind the Director's desk. Ryanban went rigid when the director finally collapsed the report back into her desktop with a soft chuckle. Putting on a smile, she turned her attention towards him.

"Mr. Ryanban," she said pleasantly. "Just the man I wanted to see. Would you like some tea? Or coffee, perhaps? I like mine black. I feel like I need the pick-me-up after having to deal with all these issues. Just between you and me, it’s enough to give me a migraine." Keeping up the pleasant façade, she leaned over her desk and buzzed her secretary, asking for coffee to be sent in. Ryanban watched as she leaned back in her chair, looking at him with an amused smile.

"How have you been?" she asked, "Dealing with all those rabid creatures must be quite hectic, I imagine."
Ryanban held his tongue, knowing she was not expecting an answer.

"An interesting thing happened to me yesterday," she continued. "I came across a nurse rolling one of the Unnaturals down to the Emergency Op. One of our latest acquisitions, if I remember correctly." Ryanban knew full well that she knew perfectly when the Unnatural in question had been procured. "Poor thing had rejected the implant right in the middle of a raid. I had to order an extraction to save its life." She paused when the secretary walked in with the coffee. Bia thanked the woman as she set it down on the table, waiting until the secretary had disappeared before picking up the mug. "Tell me, Mr. Ryanban: You deal with The Company security for all departments, correct?"

"Yes, Director Bia," he replied, wondering if she could hear the nervousness in his voice.

"Good, then you must know the Unnatural Classes by heart, yes?"

"I do."

"Perfect." She smiled, taking a sip from her coffee. "Could you please define them for me?"

"Director?" was all he could say in his confusion. Why wasn't she threatening him over the raid and what a failure it had been?

"Define them for me," she repeated.

"The Unnatural breeds are divided into five classes," he said, pushing away the confusion. "Elementals are the most common type, with no visually distinguishing features. They possess a low level of magic that allows them to manipulate their surroundings according to their powers. Lupus and Vampirosa are the next two common types, identified by their amber eyes and fangs respectively." He paused for a moment, looking at the Director for any hints of approval. She nodded, wordlessly telling him to continue as she sipped at her coffee.

"Magirius are Unnaturals with more powerful magic than the Elementals, which makes them rarer than the other three types. Their stronger magic exudes an aura around them that can be picked up on our scanners."

"And the last class, Mr. Ryanban? What about them?"

Ryanban gulped as he saw the direction she was taking with this conversation. Judging from the smirk she shot at him, she knew that he knew.

"I'm waiting," she prompted.

"The last class is the Hybrids," he said, cursing the woman to hell as he fought to keep his voice level. "They are the rarest type of them all."

"Indeed." She nodded. "Akira is one of our most brilliant researchers at Research and Development, and even she has had very limited success at creating a good specimen until very recently. Sometime last week, if I'm not mistaken."

Ryanban nodded. Nearly everyone had heard about 543. The very first successful Magirius Vampirosa created at The Company. A young Magirius specimen that had been captured with its Hybrid mentor in the reception area, later transformed by Akira somehow. He was still a little unclear on the details, but word was she had gotten the mentor to do it.

"What is that we do over here, Mr. Ryanban?"
Her sudden subject change threw him off for a moment, but he managed to gather himself quickly. "We secure the Unnaturals plaguing our world and assign them proper roles in our society as workers and entertainers."

"Correct." She nodded, carefully setting the mug on her table as she sat up straight. "Can you explain to me then, why you authorized the dispatch of 224 and 543 in yesterday's raid? Sector 64-B was infiltrated by Liberalists, and you sent out two untested Hybrids into the field without even so much as consulting me on the matter." Her voice grew cold as looked him in the eye. "Explain to me what made you think it would be smart to send those creatures out into such an unstable environment? Did you have any proof that they could handle such high levels of stress? According to the reports I have been provided with, 543 was showing signs of instability ever since its transformation. So, Mr. Ryanban, what do you have to say in your defense?"

Ryanban cleared his throat, finding it hard to speak past the invisible stone lodged in his windpipe.

"I don't like repeating myself, Mr. Ryanban," she reminded him.

"Akira told me you had given your approval for the raid, Director," he replied.

"And you did not see it fit to confirm this with me?" Bia quirked a brow.

Having nothing to say to that, he remained quiet. He should have known Akira had lied, but she had charmed her way into getting his go-ahead and launched the raid.

"I know that you can be a little weak-willed when it comes to a pretty face." Bia smirked, leaning back in her seat as she reopened the report. "You are good at what you do, Ryanban, which is why I am usually willing to overlook your little mistakes. Akira is a brilliant researcher and has revolutionized the way we control the creatures inside these towers. She knows that talent provides her with some immunity around here, but you, unfortunately, have nothing of that sort."

"Director Bia, give me a chance to explain," he said, having nothing else to say.

"Oh? I doubt anything you have to say would be a good enough explanation for the fuck up that happened in yesterday's raid. One Hybrid completely rejected the implants and the other went MIA. I wouldn't be surprised if those Liberalists have it in one of their cages right now, trying to save it. Do you have anything that can convince me to overlook this?"

Ryanban said nothing, feeling sweat drench the back of his shirt as the Director brought up certain parts of the report. One of those sections detailed the number of operatives they had lost at the hands of the unstable subject 543 when it had turned on them. Another was an excerpt from Akira's report stating that another attempt at injecting 224 with new implants would prove fatal. Something he knew Bia would never risk now that they had lost 543.

"Well, 224 can no longer be turned into a field operative," Director Bia said, as though she had dismissed her earlier demands for an explanation. "I suppose it will have to be relocated to a different department now." She pulled up a picture of the subject, scrutinizing it closely for a long time before turning her gaze towards Ryanban. "It's quite easy on the eyes. Maybe some time with Naba will prepare it for the Pleasure Program." Without waiting for a response, she nodded to herself. "Yes. I think that would work wonderfully. You're dismissed, Mr. Ryanban."

Knowing better than to tempt fate by inquiring about his punishment, he got to his feet and hurried towards the door.

"Oh, and Mr. Ryanban?" she called out as he reached the door. He froze. "Be very careful. I hear a
rabid Vampirosa is loose on L4. It would be a shame if the head of security were to have an accident."

Ryanban nearly ran out of her office, trying to put as much distance between himself and his dangerous superior as possible.

-Kurogane woke with a groan, his torso throbbing as awareness filled his mind. The pulse monitor beeped somewhere nearby, letting him know his location even before he had opened his eyes. Breathing deeply, he was relieved to notice that the breathing tube had been removed from his throat. It still hurt to breathe, but it felt good to do it with his own power. Exhaling, he opened his eyes, wincing at the sudden brightness. Blinking rapidly, he turned his head. The sound of shuffling feet whispered across the floor nearby.

"Oh good, you're awake," said a man he'd never seen before. "Certainly slept like a princess, I'd say."

"Where am I?" he croaked, the insides of his throat scraping together like sandpaper.

"Up until two hours ago," the man replied as he appeared at his side with a glass of water, "you were in the infirmary under dear Masooma's watchful eye. Now you're in the lab under my not-so-watchful eye. Good news, by the way: You're one-hundred percent Implant-free." He winked, helping Kurogane sit up. Blood rushed to his head, and Kurogane nearly blanked out for a moment. His left shoulder felt strangely light. Empty. It was almost as though his arm was gone. Even as the man pressed the glass into his hand, Kurogane glanced towards his shoulder. White bandages peeked out from under his shirt, the left sleeve hanging limply where his metal arm should have been.

The man must have noticed Kurogane's expression because he began to speak."Drink up, Steel. I had to take off your arm for repairs. You've been quite busy during your time away, I noticed." The man took the empty glass from his hand, helping him lie back down before turning to put it away. "Bet you've got one hell of a story to tell us. I had no idea the Piffle Princess guys were still producing prosthetics. How'd you get your hands on this?"

"I'm not who you think I am," he grunted, watching the man as he fiddled around with Kurogane's arm on a workbench.

"Huh?" Confusion clouded the man's face for a moment as he looked up, dark hair falling into his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not Steel," he replied, making note of the strange, half-inch metal plates protruding from the man's temples.

The man blinked a couple of times, his mouth opening and closing as he floundered for words. Kurogane noticed for the first time that, although the man seemed to be looking at him, his eyes were missing a spark. Was he blind?

"Oh." The man drew out the sound as he nodded, chuckling as he resumed his work. "Ha ha, very funny, Steel. You got me."

"I'm not joking," Kurogane said, trying to bite back the irritation that welled up inside him. "I'm not Steel."

"Oh yeah?" The man gave him a wry grin. "Who are you then?"
"My name is Kurogane," he replied. "And this Steel you and your friends are confusing me with—he's dead."

The smile slid of the man's face, his features morphing into a scowl as seconds ticked by. "All right, if this is your idea of a joke," he said, "then it's about time you quit. It's not funny anymore."

"And I told you, I'm not joking."

"Shit," the man swore explosively. "Shit! Damn it, Steel, do you have any idea what it would do to Tomoyo if she heard you say that? Haven't you put us through enough with the whole disappearing act you pulled in the middle of a raid?"

"I'm telling you I'm not-"Kurogane growled, but his words were cut off when the blind man slammed his tools on the metal tabletop.

"Quit saying that!" he yelled as he stalked around the table to loom over Kurogane. "You've said enough! After all that you've done, pretending to be dead for six months. And then showing up out of nowhere and getting shot enough times to drop dead all over again! Do you think it was easy for any of us, easy for Tomoyo, to drag your bleeding ass back here? To watch you nearly slip away for a second time?!"

Kurogane stayed quiet. The man looked ready to strangle him, and the ninja wasn't sure if he could defend himself in his weakened state. The silence dragged on between them, punctuated only by the other man's ragged breathing and the beeping of the pulse-monitor. The man continued staring down at him with his eerily blank eyes as horrified realization replaced his anger.

"No," he gasped, staggering away from Kurogane, shaking his head in denial. "No," he repeated, hurrying over to his workspace and flicking his fingers over its surface in a series of jerky movements. Holographic projections filled with the indiscernible language of Cavahall flared up to life in the space that separated them. The man's fingers danced between panels, bringing up one holograph before pulling up something else, all the while keeping up a constant mantra of denial. Several times, his sightless gaze flickered towards Kurogane before returning to the images. He wondered how a man who appeared to be blind could even see the hovering images before him, but his musings were cut short when the man sent the images slamming back into the platform with a violent snap.

"Fuck," he swore under his breath, reaching out for a short-range communication device that Kurogane had spotted in several of the bars in Cavahall. Turning it on, he cast a final, disbelieving glance towards Kurogane as a female voice crackled through the speakers.

"Yes?"

"It's Nixon," he said."Find Tomoyo and bring her down to the lab with you."

"Is everything okay over there?" Masooma asked after a beat. "Is it Steel? Is he okay?"

"Just find Tomoyo and get here," Nixon said through gritted teeth.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Masooma, just find her and bring her here," he snapped, turning off the device before she could reply. Nixon shot Kurogane a stare the ninja couldn't quite decipher. Turning away, he began to pace, having apparently decided to ignore him completely until the women arrived. As seconds ticked by, Kurogane wondered if he should have just kept the truth to himself for the time being.
Hopeless

Fai was beginning to grow sick of the color white, and having grown up in a world covered in snow, that was saying something. At least in Ceres, he’d had freedom of movement. Here in this unnamed world, trapped in a tiny cage, Fai decided that he abhorred the color.

A ghost of an itch formed at the base of his neck, deep within the muscles, in a place he couldn't reach without clawing himself open. Hissing in irritation, he reached up to scratch at his skin anyway. His short nails scraped against smooth, unmarked flesh, and yet the itch persisted. Sighing, he dropped his hand, once again looking around the tiny four-by-four foot enclosure. It barely had enough room for him to crouch without hitting his head, let alone stand. And all around him, as far as he could see beyond the bars, it was nothing but an endless expanse of white.

Closing his eyes, he let his head rest against the cold, metal bars, feeling the thrum of the familiar something that charged the metal. The energy that pulsed through his cage had left him feeling not quite weakened, but somehow incomplete. As though a vital part of him had completely vanished. It was an unsettling feeling, but there wasn't much he could do against it. He had spent an entire week as a mindless drone under the influence of whatever his captors had stuck inside him. And during that week, he had willingly given them enough knowledge about his skills to make escape a very difficult task for himself. It was a wonder he had managed to reject thing's influence on him at all.

What does it matter now? The damage has already been done, a voice hissed viciously at him as his thoughts drifted back to all he had done. It didn't matter that he hadn't been a willing participant in any of it, because he had still done it. You should have been stronger. You should have fought harder. Stopped before your claws ripped through Syaoran.

Syaoran's face, frozen in shock, flashed through Fai's mind. He shuddered as he remembered the brunette's warm blood sliding down his fingers. You did that to him, the voice hissed again. Shaking his head, he opened his eyes. Blank, featureless white met his gaze, but now he forced himself to stare at it. It was better than seeing Syaoran's betrayed look, the accusation in those eyes, that single, whispered question.

He could have fought back earlier. He could have tried to stop them from forcing his hand into turning Syaoran. He had trained extensively to protect his mind against possession spells in Celes. What these people had done to him wasn't all that different. And yet, he'd been led around by his captors like a dog on a leash, had jumped when they told him to, rolled over when they said so, had even killed at their command. And worst of all, he'd cursed Syaoran to live out the rest of his life as a vampire.

Fai had been lucky he'd been forced into making Kurogane his only prey when he'd been turned. The appeal of the ninja's blood had been reduced by his hatred of the man at that time, making it easier for him to control his hunger. And then by the time the clone had returned his magic and freed him from the blood-bond, Fai had learned enough self-control to avoid being tempted by the blood of others. He had a wider choice of prey now, but Fai could control himself around humans more easily, even if their blood still sang to him.

Syaoran never got that chance, the voice reminded him. He doesn't know why you turned on him. He won't even be able to control himself. And he has no one there to help him through it.
Sighing again, Fai closed his eyes, focusing on his breathing in an attempt to drown out the voice. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

He froze, eyes snapping open as he picked up traces of something strange in the atmosphere. Barely there, yet distinct enough to leave a mark. He breathed in, letting the air fill up his lungs as he tried to identify the source. Whatever it was, it left a faint metallic aftertaste in his mouth.

Concentrating harder, he could almost feel the metallic compound diffuse within his blood with the oxygen his lungs pulled out of the air. And as he began to look closer, Fai could feel his magic attack the foreign substance. Like antibodies within the blood, his magic tried to defend his body from it. His magic fizzled out just as it destroyed the alien compound. But by then he'd drawn in another breath, and his magic had begun the war all over again. Frowning, Fai tried to summon his magic, feeling the burn within his blood that had come into existence every single time he had tried to use a spell since regaining control of his body and mind.

Had they put something in the air to keep him from using magic? In all his travels, he had never heard of something like that. But it was possible they had come up with something that could inhibit magic from functioning at all, unlike the wards that he was familiar with that merely absorbed the magic before it could take a physical shape. Wards like those could be overcome if the mage casting the spell was stronger than the mage that had cast the wards. Like what had happened in Rekourt; Fai's spell had countered the library's wards, allowing Mokona to transport them out of the world. Could a similar approach work here? Maybe he could simply overpower whatever it was in the air. He was, after all, much stronger than the average magician.

Holding his breath, he decided to give it a try. Fai called on his magic, gritting his teeth when the burn in his blood intensified. Ignoring the discomfort, he focused his attention on the sliver of blue that slowly began appearing in his mind's eye. He could picture it flowing sluggishly through his body, struggling against the opposition offered by the alien substance within his blood. A pressurized burn began to emanate from the metal bracelets they had fit around his wrists. When Fai did not relent, blisters began to form wherever the metal touched, and his head spun as the urge to breathe became too much for him to ignore.

His magic slipped from his grasp when Fai finally let up with a gasp. His skin itched as his vampire healing fixed the blisters. Fai fought back several colorful curses, his temper flaring in the face of his frustration. The last time he had seen Syaoran had been during that ill-fated raid, and the boy had been out of control. And something told him it was not just because of the sudden transition into a vampire. He had looked feverish and sick, something a vampire simply could not be. Unless it wasn't a normal sickness. It had been over a week since they had come here.

What if... What if Syaoran had already overstayed his welcome in that world? His healing wouldn’t let him slip into a coma like the last time they’d tried that. But even with the healing working in his favor, the price must have been taking its toll on the brunette somehow. And just how long would Syaoran be able to withstand the effects of two opposing forces waging war within his body? He had to find some way to get them out of there.

If there is a way left. Your magic is useless in this place.

-0-

He was burning.

He was freezing.
His head hurt like something was drilling holes through his skull, but for the first time in a long time he could hear nothing but the sound of his own breath. Blinking slowly, he tried to sit up, realizing he couldn't quite move his hands to support his weight. His shoulders were curled inwards at an awkward angle, and his arms were wrapped around his torso in a pale imitation of hug. Something tied the long sleeves of the shirt he wore behind his back. Pain stabbed up and down the length of his body when he tried to tug the bindings loose. Moaning against the unpleasant sensation, he stopped, raising his head to look at himself.

The shirt he had thought he had been wearing turned out to be an elaborate patchwork of straps and buckles that kept his arms firmly in place. Groaning, he let his head drop back on the lumpy pillow he'd been sleeping on, realizing there was no way he could get out of a straitjacket on his own. He tried to think back on how he had ended up in such a precarious position. He had been with Fai, separated from Kurogane and Mokona upon their landing. He remembered running, but every time he tried to think further back, the pounding in his head intensified. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from crying out as he forced himself to remember past the blocks on his memory.

He felt as though he was on fire again, a distant bell tolling in sync with his throbbing head. His eyes watered as he kept pushing himself. He had been captured, but... what had become of Fai? As if everything else had not been enough, an itch began to develop at the base of his neck. Pulses of something shot through his spine and suddenly he was back to freezing. A hole formed in the pit of his stomach.

"Do not force yourself." A cool hand pressed against his forehead. He squinted up through watering eyes, a curtain of blond hair brushing against his cheek as he tried to make out the features of the person leaning over him.

"F-Fai-san?" he croaked, surprised at the hoarseness of his voice as though he had been screaming for hours and hours. Something cold pressed against his lips, spilling into his mouth as the blond supported his head. It slid down his throat, soothing an ache he had not even been aware of having been there, his hunger subsiding. Breathing through his nose, he gulped down the liquid, surprised at the sharp tangy scent it carried. What—was that blood?

He gasped, immediately regretting it when he began choking on the drink. Spots of black danced across his vision even as the container of blood was removed from his lips. A firm hand pulled him into a sitting position, thumping his back a couple of times to help clear his airways.

"Easy, little one," said the person that had just fed him blood, supporting his weight with one hand. Syaoran belatedly realized that the voice was too soft, too feminine to belong to Fai. Blinking away the spots, he focused his gaze on the face hovering above him. The woman holding him up smiled beatifically as she looked back. The corners of her blue eyes crinkled, lending her otherwise aristocratic features a softer edge. She brushed back a stray strand of her wavy hair before maneuvering Syaoran into a proper sitting position.

Syaoran stared.

He knew he had seen that face somewhere before, though it took him longer than it should have to remember the place. What was wrong with him?

"Your fever has let up a little." The woman's smile widened, and Syaoran caught a hint of something sharp poking out from underneath her lips. "That means the new medicine is working."

"I've been sick," he said, his question coming out as more of a statement.

"Gravely." The woman nodded. She picked up a rusted metal container, bringing it to his lips once
more. Knowing what the contents were, he kept his mouth pressed into a thin line, ignoring the rumbling of his stomach. Confusion made his head spin. Why would he react this way to blood?

_Fai’s claws ripped through his chest. His damaged heart struggled to beat as the magician pulled them back, impassively watching Syaoran gasp for breath before slitting open his wrist._

_Burning poison slid down his throat, scorching everything in its path and—_

A scream tore free of his throat, the pounding in his head multiplying to the intensity of a stampede of elephants trampling his skull. Image after image flashed through his eyes, his mind barely comprehending as his body began to tremble. His thrashed within the confines of his jacket, shaking his head as he tried to put some distance between himself and... whatever _this_ was. It didn’t make any sense. Why would... why would Fai attack him like that? And then force him to—

“Calm _down_, little one.” He was pulled back from the ocean of memories as she shook him. “Do not force your memories.”

“Why?” he gasped, the pain ebbing as the memories slipped from his grasp. Suddenly, his most pressing concern was the prickle at the back of his neck, the pins and needles stabbing his tied arms, and the alternating waves of hot and cold assaulting his body. “Who are you?” he asked, wanting to know for sure if this was indeed who he thought it was.

“My name is Emeraude,” she replied, confirming his suspicions. The golden-haired woman put the metal container away. “You have been very ill these past couple of days. The medicine I gave you suppresses your memories. Whatever it was that _The Company_ did to you…” She frowned, brushing hair out of his eyes in a motherly gesture. “…it left some strong imprints on your mind. I suspect the implants are affecting you in ways unprecedented before now. I wish I could remove them, but…” Her expression grew forlorn. “They are too deeply embedded to risk extraction without damaging your spine.”

“Is that what itches?” he asked, furrowing his brows when, despite not understanding half of what she’d said, her explanation seemed to make complete sense. How was that possible? Did he already know this and couldn’t remember because of his suppressed memories? “And why am I tied up?”

“The itch is, I presume, the inhibitors I placed keeping the Implants from driving you mad,” Emeraude said, folding her hands in her lap. “You were quite adamant on ripping yourself open to extract the implants in your delirium. The ties are there to keep you from harming yourself.”

“Where—” He paused to wet his lips, his mouth dry. He’d tried to hurt himself? He couldn’t recall having done anything of that sort. He flinched at the toll of a bell, his head screaming at the sound, but it was gone the very next second when he remembered the woman’s warning and stopped forcing himself to remember. “Where am I?” Fai’s face flashed through his mind, the bell tolling louder this time. He flinched again but the sound faded away once more. “Fai-san!” he exclaimed. “I was with Fai-san. Is he okay? Is he with you?”

“Fai-san. You called me by that name before.”Emeraude’s expression darkened. “Is that the name of your creator?”

“My _what_?”

“The vampire who turned you,” she clarified.
“What?” he half-laughed. “I’m not-” His breath hitched, eyes widening as another set of memories crashed into him.

_Burning poison slid down his throat, scorching everything in its path. His body ablaze, every fiber of his being on fire. His throat tearing itself out, wails spilling unbidden from his lips as every cell in his body was simultaneously ripped apart and put back together in a way it was never meant to be._

“A vampire…” he choked, the world spinning on its axis. He looked at Emeraude in disbelief. “I’m a vampire…” He shook his head, hoping to dislodge the realization from his mind. It was ridiculous. He couldn’t be a vampire. Why would Fai turn him anyway? Spots of darkness danced across his vision, his breath coming in short gasps as more memories returned.

_Blood flowing down his fingers, caking around his mouth, staining his clothes. Lifeless green eyes stared into nothing. Ryuuoh!_

Bile rose in his throat as he threw himself to one side, throwing up on the floor beside his cot. Blood and saliva and stomach fluids splattered on the floor as he heaved, choking on his own sickness. Emeraude rubbed soothing circles on his back as he lay on his side, trembling. His stomach twisted, and he threw up some more.

“Easy, little one,” Emeraude murmured, petting his head like one might a frightened child as his stomach ran out of fluid. He heaved, gasping for breath as tears slipped down his face, mingling with the saliva hanging from his chin. “Take it easy. Transition is never an easy thing to deal with for most newborns.”

“No…” he groaned. Drawing his knees closer to his chest, he curled into a ball, shaking his head harder to dispel the memory of his victim. “Please, no…” He had _killed_ people.

The bells tolled now in a never-ending cacophony. The crescendo nearly drove Syaoran mad, drowning out Emeraude’s voice as she spoke to him. A cry erupted from his lips as the memories resurfaced. His victims appeared in the empty space before him, staring accusingly at him with hollow eyes. He shook harder, curling in on himself even more when they shuffled towards him.

“No…”

Syaoran screamed as sanity was wrenched from his grasp once more.
Sorry it took me so long to update this story guys. Real life is a very demanding *itch. Between balancing a job, getting married, managing a house, finding out that we're expecting and then losing the baby has been hard. But anyhow, here I am once again, hopefully with a better update schedule (aka not vanishing for two whole years *fingers crossed*)
So without further ado, here's a new chapter. Enjoy~

Kurogane's stomach twisted as he watched Nixon pace on the other side of the work table. Kurogane's metal arm was laid neatly on top of it, gleaming as it reflected the light being cast from above. What was left of the artificial skin covering it, was visible in the trash can near the door. It must have been damaged beyond salvation during the raid. His attention was drawn back to the blind man as he stopped walking, staring into space for a few seconds before heading back to the work table.

Still ignoring the ninja, Nixon pulled up the holographic images from a few minutes before. Kurogane watched as he opened several new screens, fingers flicking through the air with practiced ease. Lines of that world's senseless language had appeared on several of them when the door opened with a low creak, and Masooma and Tomoyo stepped inside.

"Did you find something?" Tomoyo asked, glancing at Kurogane for a fraction of a second before she hurried over to the blind man. Masooma, on the other hand, gave him a bright smile as she headed over to his side.

"It's not what I found," Nixon said as Masooma busied herself with unbuttoning the top of Kurogane's shirt. "It's what I didn't find."

"What do you mean?" Masooma asked, swatting at Kurogane's hand when he tried to stop her from pulling off his shirt. "Let me check your bandages," she added. His gaze flickered to Tomoyo, but she was watching Nixon fiddle around with the holo-screens.

"Do you still have Steel's blood analysis stored from before the raid?" Nixon asked. Kurogane saw Tomoyo frown at the question. She shot another look towards him, but upon noticing him watching her, quickly looked away. Kurogane decided to take Nixon's cue for the time being. He wasn't sure what to make of Tomoyo. Judging from what the blind man had told him, it would not be wise to just blurt out the truth at her. She had been severely affected by Steel's disappearance. He had no doubt his counterpart was already dead, and Tomoyo would be hurt to find out about it. But he wanted to at least spare her as much pain as possible. If that meant waiting for someone she knew and trusted to take the lead, then that was what he would do.

"It's in the medical drive," Masooma said in response to Nixon's question, giving Kurogane a comforting smile as she patted his bandages. Leaving him to wrestle the buttons back in their holes, she turned her attention to Nixon. "Why do you ask?"

"Did you compare it with his current blood analysis yet?"
"I haven't had the chance," she said, her frown deepening. "I was looking at the results when you sent me looking for Tomoyo."

Kurogane could see worry replace Tomoyo's uncaring, cold façade as she looked at him again. "Is something wrong with Steel?" she asked Nixon. "Does he have any implants?"

"No." Nixon shook his head.

"Good," she breathed, and Kurogane watched the worry melt away from her face as she gave a hint of a smile.

"That's not all though." Nixon continued. Kurogane nearly cursed when those words made her smile vanish. Even if she wasn't his Tomoyo, he still wanted to keep that smile on her face. "I decided to check him for nanites, tracers, regenerators. You know, the like." Nixon waited for Tomoyo's approval to carry on.

"What do the scans say?" Masooma prompted instead as she made her way over to the table, pulling a couple of holographic screens towards her as she went.

"He's clean," Nixon replied gravely.

"That's a good thing," the medic said as she began pulling up files on the holo-screen. Kurogane wondered if she was pulling up the blood work analysis that Nixon had just mentioned. "Why do you sound like it's his funeral?"

"He's clean," Nixon repeated, emphasizing the second word as though it made all the difference in the world. For all Kurogane knew, maybe it did. He watched Tomoyo for her reaction, unable to help but notice how she differed from the Tomoyo he had known. From the subtleties in the way she held herself to the way she moved and the aura she exuded, this Tomoyo was as far as she could be from the Tsukiyomi as possible. The princess of Nihon was all about grace and gentleness wrapped up in a bundle of calm. This Tomoyo, however, seemed to behave as though there was a fire inside her, replacing all the calm and compassion inherent to every version of Tomoyo he had met during his journey so far. There was fierceness to her that seemed almost alien behind that face. She appeared… jaded.

"Wait a minute." Masooma's voice pulled Kurogane from his musings. He glanced towards her and noticed she'd pulled up what appeared to be close-up images of two samples of blood. He had seen the doctors in Piffle do something similar the last time he'd had his arm fixed. One of those samples probably belonged to Steel. "This can't be right." She frowned as she zoomed in on both images.

Looking at the two images side by side, Kurogane could see the subtle differences in the two samples. One consisted of the usual red-colored circular disks floating around in a liquid, along with oddly shaped particles. The other sample, in addition to the disks and the particles, contained a third, more unusual component. They looked tiny in comparison, but they also appeared more artificial in appearance. Round, metallic globules that were completely covered in tiny pins. He was quite certain, without even being able to read the labels, that this sample belonged to Steel. "This can't be right." She frowned as she zoomed in on both images.

"Even scrubbed blood has traces of nanites," Tomoyo said, walking closer to the scans Masooma was working on. "They don't just disappear altogether."

"Exactly!" Nixon exclaimed so vehemently Kurogane jumped. The man jabbed a finger at Kurogane's blood sample. "The Company doesn't have the tech available to pull off something like
"That's why I couldn't trigger the nanites to fix his internal damage," Masooma said. "I thought maybe they'd been destroyed while he was missing but they were never there."

"But Steel had custom augmentations done," Tomoyo insisted. "Nixon personally did those."

"Yeah, he wanted an upgraded immune system." Nixon nodded as he pulled up a relevant file on the screen. "I built in shielding systems to keep someone from turning them off," he explained. "No one could destroy those babies without killing the carrier. And since he's sitting right there…"

"He's not Steel," Masooma breathed. Kurogane risked a glance in Tomoyo's direction. She appeared frozen in place, giving him a wide-eyed stare. A heartbeat later, her expression twisted into fury. In less than a second, she was upon him. She grabbed him by the collar, the cold barrel of a gun pressing under his chin as she glared at him.

"Who are you?" she spat, yanking at his shirt to pull him closer as she did so. "What have your people done with Steel?"

Kurogane was shocked into silence by her reaction. Even if she was just a counterpart, Tomoyo had always been the calm, reasonable one. That was what made Tomoyo, Tomoyo. He knew this version of her was damaged in some ways; he'd have been blind not to notice that. But this was just... like she wasn't Tomoyo at all.

"Answer me," she hissed, burying the gun deeper into his skin. "Why did The Company clone him?"

"What makes you think I'm his clone?" Kurogane responded, surprised by how level his tone was even if it was still raspy from disuse. Someone has to be clearheaded in this situation, he thought, and it sure as hell isn't going to be Tomoyo. Heh, if she could hear me now.

"Don't screw with me," she warned. "Steel was one of the strongest leaders the Liberalists had seen in years. Maybe that didn't sit well with your friends at The Company. So they planned an ambush and snagged him the first chance they got. Then they had that bitch Akira whip up his clone and have that dropped on our heads. Tell me," her grip on his collar tightened, "am I getting their plan right so far?"

Kurogane said nothing, watching her as his mind reeled. This can't be Tomoyo.

"Why are you here?"

"No matter how dire a situation, Tomoyo would always handle it serenely."

"Maybe he's a spy?" Masooma ventured from her spot next to the work table. Kurogane was a little surprised to note crimson runes hovering above her palm. Was she a witch? Her method of magic seemed eerily similar to Fai's.

"Well if he is," Nixon piped up, sightless eyes narrowed in Kurogane's direction, "he's pretty crappy at his job. He flat-out told me he wasn't Steel."

"You knew?" Tomoyo asked sharply. "Why didn't you just say it when I came here?"

"I wanted Masooma to confirm it first," he replied simply. "For all I knew, he could have been brainwashed by those guys."
"I'm not a clone or a spy," Kurogane said. He figured he might as well tell truth if he did not want
to be riddled with bullets. Again. He was in no condition to defend himself. Worse, he didn't even
have both his arms to help with his balance. As it was, he was completely at Tomoyo's mercy.
"And I sure as hell am not Steel. Like I told him before," he jerked his head in Nixon's direction,
"my name is Kurogane."

"Black Steel?" Tomoyo spat, turning her attention back to Kurogane. She glowered at him for a
moment, shoving him back on the cot. Darkness encroached the edges of his vision for a heartbeat
before fading away. Kurogane found himself looking up at her as she leaned over him. "Do you
take me for a fool? Translating the name into a different language doesn't change anything. Where
is the real Black Steel?"

"I don't know," he insisted, wondering if it would be wise to tell her that wherever he was,
Steel was most definitely dead.

She cocked the hammer on her gun, pointing it right between his eyes as she stepped away from
him.

"Tell me or I will shoot you right now," she said, a ring of finality to her tone. She narrowed her
eyes, hatred contorting her face so that she was barely recognizable as the woman he knew.

This is not Tomoyo, he told himself as he stared back defiantly. Just someone who looks like her.

Tomoyo fired the gun.

-0-

Sector 64B had been sealed off from public right after the raid against the Liberalists three days
ago. Guards belonging to The Company patrolled the outer perimeter of the quarantined
sector. The news said it had been hit by some new contagion of Unnatural origin that
killed everyone in that area in less than hour. Of course, The Company controlled and ran all the
news channels, so they could manipulate the story to make the Liberalists look bad. They always
did.

Not that the black-market dealer cared about either faction. He was just an ordinary man, trying to
make a living dealing in the extraordinary things which just happened to include information. The
Company had gone through a lot of trouble to secure this area from the general public. Security
seemed rather tight, but for someone like him, giving The Company drones the slip
was child's play. In less than a minute, he was strolling down the filthy, corpse-laden streets of
64B, polished cane tapping against the concrete sidewalk as he hummed a merry tune to himself.
The stench rising off the decomposing bodies was putrid but he was contentedly breathing in fresh
air through the gas-mask that he'd pulled on before entering the sector.

Blue eyes scanned their surroundings from behind a pair of vision enhancers, taking note of the
bloating bodies that littered the ghost town he walked through. Stopping before one
that was sprawled on the ground in his way, he bent down to take a closer look. Old, dried blood
pooled on the ground around it. He poked the corpse with the end of his stick. The discolored skin
ruptured, revealing a mass of squirming maggots, a sight that would have caused an average person
to fight their gag reflexes. He merely blinked, peering closer as if examining an interesting
specimen. Which, in a way, he was.

The corpse belonged to a middle-aged woman, who might have been beautiful in her life, but death
had not been so kind to her. But he wasn't as interested in her beauty, or lack thereof, as he was in
the cause of her death. Right along her throat, four diagonal slashed severed her neck, and a host of
maggots fed on the rotting flesh.

He frowned as he noticed the shape and the placement of the wounds. They were definitely of Unnatural origin. But was the attacker a Liberalist? No. Liberalists did not go after civilians. Despite the way they were always painted on the news, Liberalists valued human life as much as they did that of the Unnaturals. A new pet for The Company, perhaps? That made more sense. Akira must have gone wild with her latest toy. This whole raid could have been a cover-up for a field test.

Straightening up, he wiped the tip of his walking stick on the corpse's outfit before stepping over it and resuming his walk. He paused every now and then to check on a corpse, always finding similar wounds on the victims, though sometimes, the cause of death turned out to be bullet wounds. This definitely smelled like a cover-up for The Company's experiments. He wondered how many human subjects they'd managed to snag in a raid like this. Plenty to keep the bastards in R & D happy for a month or two.

He wandered the streets for nearly an hour, finding nothing of consequence. He didn't even bother to hack into the security monitors. The Liberalists always hacked the monitors before a job, making themselves digitally invisible as they walked through the controlled part of Cavahall. And whatever The Company did in retaliation when they found out about the rebellion's presence, they deleted from the mainframes themselves.

He paused outside a destroyed bar, running a hand through messy golden hair as he contemplated heading back. It was obvious he wasn't going to find anything of interest apart from more bodies. Just as he was about to turn back around, however, he caught sight of something gleaming in the rubble of a half-demolished wall. Blackened blood stained the concrete, though there were no signs of a body anywhere. The amount of blood seemed to indicate that whoever it belonged to was long dead, though he could not spot the owner. Stepping over the corpse of a soldier a little ways away, he approached the spot where he had seen the shine.

He scanned the debris, a smile spreading across his lips beneath the gas mask as he spotted the object he was looking for, buried half-underneath the fallen brickwork. It was a sword, its silver blade coated in dried blood, the golden hilt covered in blackened fingerprints of its owner. Crouching next to the rubble, he shifted it aside to reveal the sword in its entirety. It was a finely crafted thing, the hilt designed to look like the long, slender neck of a fierce dragon with rubies for eyes.

"Hello beautiful." He whistled long and slow as he reached out and picked it up, testing its weight in the palm of his hand before straightening. "You seem like you can fetch me quite a hefty sum," he said to no one in particular. "Almost makes my trip out here worth the trouble."

He turned around and headed back the way he'd come, once again humming to himself.

Chapter End Notes

And that, dear readers, is why Kurogane should have kept the truth to himself. A bucket or virtual cookies for anyone who can guess the identity of the mysterious adventurer in the second half of the chapter. :)
First Encounters

Mokona whimpered, clutching its bleeding stump of an arm closer to its chest as it huddled up in a corner, hoping the garbage would mask its scent from pursuers. Only half an hour ago, the dimension hopper had strayed into the territory of a pack of wild dogs while scrounging for food.

Under normal circumstances, Mokona would have simply bounced out of harm's way, but Mokona had been getting by on discarded scraps for the past three days. Added to the fact that it had been searching for its companions without stopping to rest, the poor creature was exhausted beyond comprehension. Not to mention severely weakened by the lack of food.

Which had made it an ideal target for a pack of hungry mongrels when Mokona had collapsed in an alleyway. Out-hopping a group of rabid dogs wasn't so easy when Mokona could not bounce to higher ground.

Mokona had sensed a powerful burst of Fai's magic in sector 64B three days ago and had made its way there in hopes of finding Fai. It took the dimension hopper nearly three days to find a way to reach the right sector. By then, hoping for the blond to still be there was a bit of a long shot but Mokona had had no other leads in locating its companions. So the dimension hopper had made its way towards the part of Cavahall where it suspected Fai to have last been, unaware of the destruction that awaited it there.

Mokona had almost turned back when it came across the first rotting, maggot-infested corpse. But the dimension hopper had continued on in hopes that it would be able to find a clue to Fai's whereabouts somewhere. That turned out be a big mistake when the dogs cornered it in the alleyway where Mokona had stopped to catch its breath. Taking Mokona to be fresh food, they had attacked. The dimension hopper barely made it out of the confrontation alive.

Nursing its injury, Mokona dragged its stubby paws across the concrete as it continued on, heading deeper into the sector. The dimension hopper had managed to somehow lose the pack of dogs, hiding its trail in the stench of corpses, but unfortunately, that had not happened before one of the dogs had bitten off a sizable chunk of its right paw. The stump bled sluggishly, matting its white fur with dirty brown splotches where the blood had dried.

Looking behind it and seeing nothing but a ghost city, it continued staggering through the empty streets. Though the wound had begun sealing up with some help from its magic, Mokona was still losing blood too quickly. If the dimension hopper did not get help soon, it knew it would die. The thought of death had never bothered the magical creature before, but as it became a very real possibility in its future, Mokona could not help but cry.

Fai and Syaoran and Kurogane would be stranded there and Mokona would never be able to see anyone again.

Mokona stumbled on a piece of debris, falling face-first into the ground. Another whimper shook its tiny body as it struggled to get back up.

"Fai..." Mokona sobbed, not even sure why it was calling out the magician's name. Fai would be long gone from this place by now.

Its long ears perked up at the sound of whistling nearby. Someone was here, alive. Mokona could ask them for help and then when the bleeding stopped, Mokona could start looking for its friends again. With renewed determination, the dimension hopper picked itself back up. Even as the world
twisted and tumbled around it, the creature staggered towards the source of the noise. Clambering down a tiny mound of rubble, Mokona spotted a familiar figure heading its way.

"Fai," it gasped as the blond paused to watch Mokona descend. Darkness filled its vision as it tumbled down the last couple of feet, landing on the concrete with a tiny cry. Mokona heard the sound of footsteps racing towards it as consciousness began to flee from its grasp. The adrenaline and willpower that had been fueling the dimension hopper up until this point suddenly vanished altogether. Mokona was safe. It had found Fai. Everything would be okay now.

Warm hands carefully turned it over and Mokona spotted a pair of blue eyes looking down at it through a pair of odd-looking glasses.

"Fai…" It smiled in relief, though its voice came out as nothing more than a sigh.

"It's okay, little friend," Fai murmured as he picked Mokona up. "I've got you now."

-Fai looked around in trepidation when his sensitive hearing picked up the sound of approaching footsteps. Even though the sound grew nearer with each second, Fai found it impossible to see past the white walls that surrounded him. So instead of straining against the invisible barriers, he closed his eyes and focused on the sound of the footsteps. It was easy for him to deduce that they belonged to two women, one in a position of authority, for she walked with strong, purposeful strides, and the other some sort of servant, her footsteps softer, more careful, as though their owner was afraid of drawing attention to herself by being too loud. The footsteps stopped before his cage, and Fai opened his eyes.

"Akira was right," a dark-haired woman said, peering through the bars of his cage. "You certainly are a pretty one."

"I prefer the term handsome," he replied, keeping his tone light as he met her heavy-lidded gaze. Her lavender eyes glittered with amusement as she appraised him. A shiver ran down Fai's spine, though he knew it wasn’t because the air was cold. He managed to keep his discomfort from showing on his face.

"Tell me," the woman said, as though speaking to a child, "what are you called?"

"Fai D. Fluorite."

"Wrong answer," the woman said as she tapped the top of his cage. For a split second, nothing happened. And then, suddenly Fai felt every hair on his body stand up, static charging the air before a surge of power rushed into his body from the floor. It ripped through his flesh, piercing right through his bones. He screamed, his body thrashing upon the floor as he blanked out.

And then, as soon as it had begun, it stopped. A strong ache lingered in his body as Fai lay against the cold metal in a limbless heap, gasping for breath.

"Let's try that again, shall we?" the woman suggested as Fai struggled to push himself back up into a sitting position. "What are you called?"

"F-Fai." He panted, squinting at the woman through his watering eyes. She frowned. Next to her, Fai noticed the servant girl cringing in fear. The woman tapped the top of his cage once more and the energy flared to life again. It tore through his body, burning skin and muscles alike. Fai writhed and thrashed, screaming. Minutes, hours, even weeks seemed to pass before the electricity cut off.
Fai could feel bile rise up in his throat, the metallic tang of blood collecting in his mouth from where he'd bitten his tongue. The air was heavy with the stench of singed hair and burnt flesh. His stomach churned, and Fai fought the urge to throw up as he looked up at the woman. His limbs trembled as sweat slithered down his skin.

"It seems to me that Akira did not bother explaining how this works," the woman said casually as she straightened up. "Subspecies, such as yourself, do not have names. Legally speaking, your identity ceased to exist the minute you became the property of The Company. Not that you had any legal freedom before your capture," she added as an afterthought.

Narrowing his eyes, he spat blood even as he felt his tongue heal itself. "I am a human being," he gasped. "I don't belong to anyone."

"On the contrary." The woman smirked as she took something from the girl standing beside her. It clattered on the floor near Fai when she threw it through the bars. "I'll admit that you all have your…" She paused, eyeing him up and down as her smirk took on a sinister edge, "…uses. But in the end, Unnaturals are only a little better than animals. You need to be taught your place. Now put that on." She ordered, nodding towards the object she had thrown inside.

Looking at it a little closer, Fai realized it was a metal collar, made of two interlocking semi-circles. Their surfaces appeared smooth and featureless, the edges designed to fit together seamlessly. When Fai made no attempts to do as she had directed, the woman touched the top of his cage for the third time and the floor came alive with electricity.

Fai screamed. And screamed and screamed as his world was consumed by pain.

By the time she turned it off, Fai was nearly unconscious. His mind went blank, unable to tell up from down. The only thing that he could hear was the horrible sound of himself choking for air. His chest felt as though hundreds of knives were stabbing him from the inside. And yet, even as he lay there, body shaking, he could feel himself heal.

"If you don’t want another dose of that, you'd better put on that collar now, 224," the woman drawled. "Unless you want this to keep up."

Hands trembling, he picked up the metal object.

"You want me to take away my own freedom?" he asked, somehow managing to get back into a sitting position, though he had to lean heavily against the side of his cage.

"You didn't have much to begin with," the woman replied. Fai looked over at the other woman and noticed a similar band peeking out from underneath her collar. Another Unnatural?

Fai contemplated throwing it back at the woman, consequences be damned. He wasn't about to put something like that around his neck. He still had to find a way to get to Syaoran, after all.

*You can't find Syaoran if you're dead!*

"I can keep this up all day long, you know," the woman reminded him as she reached for the activation switch again.

"W-Wait!" he cried, hating himself for what he was about to do. But he knew he couldn't help anyone if he died. And this woman seemed to have no qualms about killing him if it came down to it. "Just give me a moment."

Fighting back a shudder, he looked down at the semi-circles in his hands, slowly bringing them to
his neck. The metal dug into his skin as he pressed the two halves together, and they automatically
locked in place with an ominous click. A wave of exhaustion washed over him as the last bits of his
magic were siphoned off by the collar. *It's made out of the same material as the bands around your
wrists,* his mind supplied.

He heard a soft beep as the front of his cage opened, making him look up.

"Get out," the woman ordered. Not wanting another round of electricity wreaking havoc on his
body, Fai obeyed. He crawled out of the tiny space and into the corridor, struggling to stand up and
failing miserably.

"Pick it up," she barked at her servant girl, who shot forward and grabbed Fai by his arm. In a
surprising show of strength, she pulled him to his feet, keeping her fingers clasped tightly to keep
him from falling. He sent the servant girl a grateful smile before turning his attention to other
woman.

"My name is Naba." She smiled so warmly, it almost made her look beautiful. "You can address
me as Mistress Naba. I will be your trainer until I see fit to release you into the Pleasure Program."
The cruel glint in her gaze twisted her beauty into something terrible, an effect further pronounced
when all warmth faded from her expression, leaving behind nothing but sadistic glee. "Welcome to
the rest of your life, 224."
Kurogane was floating in darkness, a place where nothing reached him. Silence pressed down on him until a soft voice pulled him out.

"What is your name?"

He still floated in an emptiness, but the voice anchored him in place. He felt compelled to reply. Could it help him find a way out if he answered it? A voiceless feeling told him it would. All he had to do was reply. He could do that.

"Kurogane."

"Black Steel. Is that your real name?"

A harder question. Did it qualify as his real name? It was not his true name, but it was still his name. Did that make it real? He felt the tether loosen, the silence beginning to drag him back into the emptiness. Instinct told him that all he had to do to make the voice talk was answer.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?"

What did he mean? A true name was not the same as a real name. Or was it? It was still his name. But…

"I don't know."

"Okay… Can you tell me your real name?"

Could he? What qualified as his real name? Was it the one he had gone by his whole life? Or the one only a select few could ever know? His thoughts raced, but his body felt incapable of moving on its own. And yet, he did not feel the panic he should have felt. It was strange, but it still felt normal. Like he had been in this state his whole life. Why would he panic over something normal? The tether slipped and he found himself drifting again.

All he had to do was answer. The voice would bring him back.

"No."

"Why not?"

He didn't know why, but that had not satisfied the voice. Maybe a different explanation could work? True names were not something to be casually handed out, after all.

"Because names hold power."

A loud creak followed his declaration, followed by a heavy sigh.

"Any luck so far?" a new voice spoke up, and suddenly the tether holding Kurogane in place vanished. Darkness swallowed him as the silence dragged him into the nothingness. His mind went numb as awareness fled from his mind.

Somewhere far, far away, voices spoke.
Nixon paused outside the door of the room Chu'nyan was using to interrogate the imposter. Pulling up the live feed from the security camera, he took a moment to look at the man being questioned. Chu'nyan knelt before him, her back towards the camera, making it impossible for Nixon to gauge her facial expression. But judging from the stiffness in her shoulders, he could guess it was proving difficult for the Elemental to do her work properly. Her fingers were pressed against the imposter's temples as she spoke to him.

Nixon frowned. If she needed physical contact to use her abilities on him, it was a clear sign that this Kurogane had a strong mind.

Nixon pushed the door open, wincing when it creaked loudly. Figuring that he had already broken her concentration, he stepped inside.

"Any luck so far?" he asked, making the teenage girl sigh as she let go of her prisoner. Nixon dismissed the live feed. Now that he was on the other side of the wooden door, he had no need to look at the proceedings through a secondary circuit.

Shaking her head, she stood up, tugging at the end of her ponytail in frustration.

"Are you sure this guy's not an Elemental?" she asked. "I mean, I've been in here with him for over an hour, trying to get him to answer me, but it's like he's got concrete fortifications around his mind or something!" She threw up her hands, glaring at the imposter. "I've tried everything on him: voice modulation, hypnosis, blackout of his senses. Nothing phased him. In the end, I had to resort to using all three on him at the same time and even then, I can barely get this guy to answer."

"I'm sorry for putting you through this," Nixon said, "but we really need to know who this guy is. If he's a plant from The Company, we need to know. He could have been sent here to take out —" He stopped, suddenly realizing that the imposter was still there as well. "Is he…?"

"Able to hear us?" Chu'nyan finished wryly. "Nah, his brain is blacked out. He can probably still hear us, but I doubt he'll be able to understand anything." She glanced at the imposter with a particularly wicked grin, "After what he's put me through though, I don't feel sorry for him."

Nixon chuckled, shaking his head. Chu'nyan was what The Company would classify as a Class A-type Elemental. She was more or less a human lie-detector coupled with a truth serum. Or at least, that was how her ability was supposed to work. It was more complicated than that, but a simplified version of it all was that Chu'nyan could compel the truth out of almost anyone. It depended on how strong a mind the other person possessed. A weak-minded person could be convinced by her voice alone while a stronger mind would sometimes require her to touch the other person. As far as Nixon knew, she had never faced someone that showed enough immunity to her abilities for her to warrant such extreme measures.

Coupling that with how proud she was of her abilities, Nixon knew the imposter ticked her off.

"What have you managed to get from him so far?"

"Nothing he hadn't told you already," she grumbled. "Still claims his name is Kurogane. Although," She frowned. "he's not sure if that's his real name or not."

"How can he not know that?"

"I dunno. When I asked him about it, he said he couldn't tell me anything because 'names hold power'." She curled her fingers to quote his words before rolling her eyes. "Makes me wonder if
he's a sleeper agent of some sort. Maybe his real name is the trigger and he's not allowed to recall it?"

"That's a possibility." Nixon nodded. His gaze shot towards the imposter when the man began to fidget. He glanced at Chu'nyan. "I thought you said he was under black-out."

"He is," the girl insisted, a rare look of fear flashing across her face before she hid it behind an angry mask. "He shouldn't be able to move at all. How the hell is he doing that?"

"Maybe he's an A-type as well?" Nixon ventured, frowning as he looked closer at the man. A-types were a rare class of Elementals, almost as hard to come by as the Magirius. They were also the most difficult types of Unnaturals to identify simply because of the Elemental ability to blend in with normal humans. Unlike the other types of Unnaturals, like the Vampirosa with their fangs, the Lupines with their eyes and the Magirius with their auras, the Elementals were the only kind that could go virtually undetected amongst humans. If they didn't use their abilities in front of The Company's mindless drones, at least.

So it wasn't that difficult to assume that an Unnatural with partial immunity to Chu'nyan's abilities had existed all this time without drawing any attention.

"If he's an Elemental, how the heck am I supposed to question him?"

"By asking him what the hell you want to know in the first place!" the imposter snarled, making Nixon jump.

"Impossible…" Chu'nyan gasped as she rounded on the man. "How did you wake up?"

"If I wasn't grateful to you lot for saving my life," the man said, hatred shining deep in his crimson eyes, "I'd kill you for treating me like a criminal. I didn't even do anything to you."

"I'd love to see you try," Chu'nyan sneered as she stalked over to him. "I don't know how you broke free, but I'm going to put you down so hard you'll wish you never tried escaping the blackout the first time."

Nixon watched as the man struggled against the metal bands keeping his legs and arm tied to the chair. Sweat shined brightly against his sickly, ashy skin, the effort tiring his weakened body, though the man didn't seem like the type to let that get in his way. Chu'nyan pressed her hands against his temples, and Nixon watched as the man tried to shake her off.

"Chu'nyan, wait," Nixon said before the girl could actually put the imposter under again. "Let me try once." The girl grit her teeth, shooting Nixon a glare over her shoulder in defiance. Nixon held her gaze, knowing that despite her stubbornness, she would do as he asked. In the end, she relented, moving away with another glare. Nixon bit back a smile as he took her place before the imposter.

"You may be immune to part of Chu'nyan's abilities," Nixon told the imposter, "but you still can't lie without her knowing about it. I'm willing to give you a chance to explain yourself without any form of coercion, but bear this in mind: One lie, one slip up, I'll let Chu'nyan have her way with you. And trust me on this, Kurogane," He narrowed his eyes, "if she goes all out on you, you'll be wishing you'd told us the truth when you had the chance."

"What do you want to know?" the imposter said through clenched teeth.

"Who are you, really? Why are you here? Are you affiliated with The Company in any way or form?" Nixon rattled off, "Why do you look so much like my friend who you claimed is
dead. *How* do you know he's dead?"

"Is that all?"

"Of course not," he smiled coldly. "But I figured I should let you warm up a little first."

"Heh, how generous of you," the man scoffed as he looked away. "My name is Kurogane. Up until a week before you guys found me, I didn't even know what the heck The Company was, let alone was part of it. I'm a traveler from a place called Nihon. I couldn't have arrived here in Cavahall if your friend was still alive because two copies of the same soul can't exist in the same place."

"Are you saying you're a *dimension* traveler?"

"Yeah."

Nixon quirked a brow towards Chu'nyan in a silent question. The ability to travel through dimensions wasn't unheard of. But the amount of magic required to tear through the fabric of space was far too great for someone to crossover from one reality to another repeatedly, which was what this Kurogane seemed to be implying. Chu'nyan gave the slightest of nods. She couldn't pick any lies from him so far.

"How can you travel dimensions when you possess no magic?"

"I made a deal with the Space-Time Witch."

"The witch has been dead for over a hundred years." Nixon frowned. "You don't look a day over twenty-eight."

"I met her when she was still alive," the man replied, "and time flows differently in every world we visit. It possible she's been dead here for over a hundred years, but she died four years ago by my time."

"And *why* are you traveling dimensions?" Chu'nyan piped up.

"I'm helping someone get back something they lost."

"How do you know Tomoyo?" Nixon asked, "And where is this person you're supposed to be helping?"

"I serve another version of her in Nihon. And..." He paused. "I don't know where they are. I got separated from them. I only want to find my companions and be on my way."

"Why should we believe anything you say?" Chu'nyan said, and Nixon wondered if this man was somehow also proving immune to her lie detection.

"Because it's the truth," Kurogane replied. "I didn't come looking for you guys. Hell, I don't even know how I ended up here in the first place. The last thing I remember before waking up in your medical station was chasing down the kid and the idiot."

"Who?"

"My companions, Tsu—Syaoran and Fai. I saw them during the raid, and I was trying to get to them. The kid was right there with me. Did you bring him in too?"

"I'm sorry." Nixon shook his head, noting the way Kurogane paled. "You were the only one we could grab at the time. The soldiers were everywhere, and we didn't have time for anything else."
"You were dying after all."

"How long has it been?" the man asked, a hint of urgency to his tone. "How long have I been here?"

"Why do you want to know?" Chu'nyan questioned.

"I don't have time for this, damn it!" Kurogane snarled. "I don't care if you trust me or not. I've told you I'm not here for you guys. I need to find my companions. It had already been a week when I last saw them. Now tell me, how long have I been here?"

"Four days."

Kurogane's eyes widened for a fraction of a second before he swore. "Fuck! Let me out of this chair. I need to find him now!" He began to struggle against his bonds.

"Why?" Nixon asked, crossing his arms. He made no motion to free the man.

"He can't stay in any world longer than a few days." Something told Nixon this information wasn't something Kurogane would normally give up so willingly. But he seemed genuinely worried about his companion. "The last time we tried, the kid ended up in a coma. We've been here for eleven days. I need to get to him before something happens to him."

"As compelling as your story may sound," Nixon said, noting how Kurogane froze at his words, "still don't really trust you. You might think you're telling us what you believe to be the truth, but until we can know for sure, I'm afraid we can't let you go."

"Fuck you!" Kurogane snarled, resuming his struggles, shocking Nixon when the metal groaned under the force of his attempts to get out. "Let go of me, damn it, or I swear I'll rip you apart with my bare hands. If anything happens to the kid because of you, I won't even care about the fact that you saved my life."

"Look at it from our perspective for a moment, Kurogane," Nixon said. "You're asking us to put a lot of faith in your word. Give us some time to look at our options, at least. Cooperate with us, and maybe if we believe you, we might pitch in and help you find your friends."

"Screw cooperation," the man growled, though Nixon was pleased to note he ceased his struggles. Although, that was probably more because Kurogane had exhausted his strength for the time being. "I'll get out of here with or without your help."

"All right then," Nixon said cheerfully. "You just sit tight, and I'll go see what Tomoyo has to say about it all, okay? Brilliant." And then, without waiting for a response, Nixon grabbed Chu'nyan's arm and proceeded to drag her outside. As the door swung shut behind them, Nixon heard Kurogane swearing at them as he proceeded towards Tomoyo's office.
Losses

There came times when Syaoran thought he was mad. His body burned as though lit on fire from the inside; restlessness was a constant ache in his heart. And then there was that ever persistent itch. That thing at the base of his neck that shot pulses through his spine that made him grind his teeth. It was impossible to ignore even if Emeraude had assured him it no longer had any control over him.

Hunger gnawed at his insides every second he spent awake. The blood they brought him rarely satisfied him for more than an hour. And he couldn't manage to keep the food down at all. Which was strange because he knew vampires could eat normal food. He had seen someone do it before.

Syaoran frowned, trying to recall who it was that he had known, but as the bells grew louder in his mind, he stopped forcing his memories. Emeraude had told him they were repressed for his own benefit. He became delirious every time he remembered something, screaming and raging at thin air for hours. So the older vampire had given him some sort of medicinal concoction to help him with that. Whatever had happened to him, it was bad. Bad enough to rob him of his sanity.

But something told Syaoran his memories were not the reason behind his insanity. No. It was the bells. The bells that never stopped and grew louder every time he tried to remember. It was the bells. He was sure of it. It had to be. The bells were important, though he could not recall why. All he knew was that they were connected to the reason he went mad every time he remembered. It was as though the bells intensified everything around him to such an extent his mind simply couldn’t cope with it. Sights, sounds, even feelings, everything became heightened to a point where his own sense of existence turned to nothing. And the bells would always be there, ringing so loud all he could do was scream, hoping to drown out the sound.

He had told Emeraude about it, though she only looked at him pitifully whenever he brought it up. She had no idea what had happened to him. No one did. He had been found by the Scavengers in one of Cavahall's sectors after a raid by The Company. He had been left for dead amidst a pile of corpses, but the Scavengers had found him and brought him to the mines.

The Scavengers ran a series of mines just outside of Cavahall, right at the border of the wastelands. They procured slaves from The Company to work in these mines, although they were also known to snatch Unnaturals whenever they could. The Company tolerated this, apparently, because the Scavengers procured the precious metal Cerellium that The Company used in most of its construction projects. It was a metal that they used to suppress an Unnatural's abilities; the research and development department at The Company had developed customized compounds for each of the five classes of Unnaturals.

According to the information tattooed above Syaoran's collarbone, his designation was 543, and he was a hybrid between a Vampirosa and a Magirius. Their boss seemed pleased with his acquisition according to Emeraude, who herself was a Vampirosa serving as the nurse for all Unnaturals working at the mines. She'd been instructed to do everything in her power to get Syaoran into a state of mind where he could be put to use. And the only solution she had come up with was suppressing his memories.

A part of him resented her for robbing him of the very thing that had turned him into the person that he now was, but a second part of him felt grateful. His memories carried with them a heavy burden, the knowledge of which was enough to drive him insane. At least this way, without such grave information, he could function like a normal person.
"Get up!" ordered Fai’s trainer as he gasped for breath.

His limbs trembled as he struggled to pick himself off the floor. The skin on his neck itched as the burnt flesh healed.

"A creature like you must learn not to look your betters in the eye," Naba told him. "You are nothing but a pretty face on an inferior being. Your soul, your mind, your body belongs to The Company to use as we please. If you ever had any delusions about being worth something, it's about time you learnt better. You are nothing."

Fai glared at the woman. "Sounds to me like you could do with some learning yourself."

The woman smiled thinly, pressing a button on the remote she held, sending powerful shocks coursing through Fai's body. He screamed, falling back to the floor, writhing in agony as electricity tore through his muscles.

"You will do well to remember your place, 224," the woman said as she crouched next to him, "You may speak only when given the permission to do so."

"Go to hell," he gasped, gritting his teeth for the inevitable pain as he looked her right in the eye. He screamed when the next shock ripped through him. He felt her cold fingers caress his face as she leaned over him.

"You're even more beautiful when you scream." She gave him a lecherous grin. Licking her lips, she pushed his sweat-drenched hair away from his forehead and added, "My gorgeous little pet. You will learn to accept me as your mistress."

"I doubt that," Fai hissed, biting back a groan when a spasm jerked through his limbs. It left behind a deep, lingering ache.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, dragging him into a sitting position. Fai reached up with trembling hands to make her let go, but she held fast, tightening her hold as she yanked at his hair.

"You won't be saying that for long, 224," she whispered, tracing the shell of his ear with her tongue before nibbling at the lobe in the end. "Your willpower is no doubt strong. It had to be for you to reject the implants, but when I'm done with you, you will be the perfect little slave, my pet." With that, she shoved him away. Fai collided with the tiled floor as his head spun.

Naba straightened up, pocketing the remote before turning to her silent slave. The woman had been standing in the corner all this time with her head bowed in a submissive manner. But she cowered when the woman turned towards her. "Take it back to its cage. Make sure you feed it before locking it up. We will resume our training tomorrow."

It felt as though years went by as Fai concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other as the slave girl supported his dead weight to the cage. She somehow managed to get him inside, though Fai got the feeling she was eager to get away from him. The minute his body hit the steel floor of the cage, the slave-girl raced outside, sealing the entrance behind her. Struggling to sit upright, he leaned against the side of the cage, observing the girl through half-lidded eyes. She stood pressed up against the opposite wall, watching him warily, trying not to let her fear show on her face.

"You can go if you want, you know," he murmured.
"No." She shook her head, her voice just as soft and submissive as her appearance. "I need to feed you."

"But you're afraid of me."

"I am nothing," the girl whispered, more to herself than to Fai. She looked down at her feet. "My soul, my mind, my body belongs to The Company, to do with it as they please."

Fai frowned, opening his mouth to tell her otherwise when the girl yanked out a knife from her dress and slashed the inside of her wrist. Biting back a scream, she took in a shaky breath, repeating what Fai guessed had to be a mantra. "I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body belongs to The Company to do with it as they please." She sobbed before taking a step towards Fai. Blood dripped from her injured flesh onto the spotless floor.

Fai watched in shock as the closed the distance between them, thrusting her wounded arm through the bars of his cage all the while keeping up her self-deprecating mantra.

"Stop it." She nearly jumped at the sound of Fai's voice, but then merely shook her head, repeating the mantra a little more forcefully. "I'm not going to take your blood," Fai said between clenched teeth. Being electrocuted so many times in a single day had drained the strength from his body, but he would not drink from someone who was so scared of him. It was harder to get the next words out as he struggled to keep his instincts under control, but he refused to go crazy over just a little bit of spilled blood. "Go get that wound treated."

"I am nothing," the girl chanted under her breath, eyes closed as she held out her arm for him. "My soul, my mind, my body belongs to The Company to with it as they please."

"Stop it," Fai insisted. "I don't want your blood."

"No," she gasped. She somehow managed to get her fingers around the collar of his shirt and pulled him towards her. Fai nearly fell on his face but he steadied himself with his hand. "I have been ordered to feed you. Mistress Naba is watching. If you don't eat, I-I..." Her voice cracked as she tried to convey whatever it was she felt through her desperate gaze alone.

"What?" he asked, his heightened senses aware of every drop of blood that slithered down her pale flesh. "What will happen to you?"

"I will be punished."

"For something you're not responsible for?" Even as the words left his mouth, Fai realized just how stupid the question sounded. Of course she'd be punished. If they could torture him simply for being a vampire with a mind of his own, they could most certainly do the same to her for not following orders. Even if their demands were beyond her will. Not for the first time, Fai wondered how Syaoran was faring. Was he somewhere in this facility being treated like an inferior being, getting electrocuted or enduring humiliation? Or maybe he'd gotten away? He could always hope for miracles.

But when have miracles ever happened for any of you? a voice, that sounded suspiciously like Syaoran, hissed in his mind. Ignoring the guilt and the worry he felt, he returned his attention to the slave girl.

"Fine, I'll do it." He sighed. The girl released his shirt, bringing her arm closer to his mouth. Fai took it in his hands. "But you have to get it treated right after, all right?"

The girl said nothing, and Fai decided to pretend she would do as he had asked. Taking care not to
scratch her with his fangs, he pressed his lips around the wound, lapping at the blood with his
tongue. He felt her stiffen under his touch, shuddering from something that could have been fright
or disgust. He couldn't tell without a blood-bond like the one he'd once shared with Kurogane.

Painfully aware of her discomfort, Fai pulled back feeling his stomach roil from the aura that now
surrounded her. He was still hungry, but he just couldn't take any more of her blood. He wondered
if this girl could somehow manipulate the emotions of those around her. Or maybe it was just the
guilt bubbling up inside his stomach that drove away his appetite.

"Won't you take any more?" she asked, a hint of surprise leaking into her voice when he let go of
her arm.

"No, I'm not really that hungry," Fai smiled, though he doubted the girl could tell it was fake.

"Oh." She pulled her arm back, clutching it close to her chest.

"Thank you," he continued. "If you don't mind my asking, what is your name?"

"109."

"No." He shook his head, still keeping up the smile. "I mean, your real name."

"I-I..." She appeared shocked by his question. She must not get asked about her proper name very
often. "I don't have one." She stammered.

"Everyone has a name," Fai insisted. "I'm Fai. And you are?"

"Xing Huo," she whispered.

"That's a pretty name." He smiled, somehow managing to keep the shock from showing up on his
face. Xing Huo had been the girl who had sent Syaoran to Yuuko's shop after he had escaped from
captivity. This girl must have been one of the originals, then. "Can you tell me what happened to
my friend?"

"543?"

"His name is Syaoran."

"He's gone."

He felt his heart skip a beat, dread twisting his gut so painfully, he felt like he'd throw up
the blood he'd consumed. "What? What do you mean he's gone? Gone as in..." He trailed
off, unable to finish his question.

"Never made it back from Sector 64-B," she replied.

"No." Fai shook his head. "He must have escaped. He's probably just out there somewhere, getting
help." His words sounded weak even to his own ears. They had been in this world for too long. The
price had taken its toll on Syaoran and now he was...

"I'm sorry for your loss." He caught the pity in her voice as she got back to her feet. "He tried to
fight against our masters. If you don't want to end up like him... Maybe you should do as Mistress
Naba asks," she suggested quietly.

Devastated, he merely stared at the blood as she turned and walked away.
Mokona woke to a dull throbbing on its right side. The dimension hopper remembered being in a lot of pain. It also remembered being very weak and tired. But now that it had slept, it felt better. In fact, Mokona felt almost comfortable and warm—something the white creature had not experienced since arriving in Cavahall.

Slowly opening its eyes, Mokona took note of the soft bed it lay on and the patchwork quilt covering its body. Mokona wondered if it had dreamed seeing Fai before. What were the odds of fainting right after the dimension hopper saw its missing companion? Mokona's ears drooped as it dismissed Fai's image as a hallucination and began looking around its whereabouts. The room had a homey, lived-in feeling to it, with clothes strewn all over the furniture and the floor. Here and there, the dimension hopper could also spot curious-looking contraptions poking out from under the clothes, though Mokona could not figure out what they were for.

Careful not to jostle its injured side, Mokona stood up, trotting over to the edge of the bed before hopping down. A whimper escaped its mouth when the jump sent a jolt of pain through its stub of an arm. On the other side of the bed, a door opened.

"Hello, little buddy," a familiar voice called out, causing Mokona to perk up. So maybe it hadn't been a hallucination after all. "Where'd you go? I brought you something to eat."

"Fai," Mokona whispered in relief. He had found Mokona. Now they could look for the others. Syaoran had to be very sick by now. Maybe the others were around here somewhere already.

"Ah, there you are," Fai said as he stepped around the bed and approached Mokona. "What are you doing down there on the floor, little guy? You shouldn't be moving around right now." He clicked his tongue in disapproval as he picked Mokona up and set it down on the bed. "Those dogs really did a number on you." Narrowing his eyes, Fai peered at Mokona a little closer and it was then that Mokona noticed something odd.

Fai wasn't acting like Fai at all. He hadn't even asked how Mokona was feeling.

"I bet you're in a lot of pain," Fai said as he turned away. Mokona frowned. Fai spoke like he thought Mokona couldn't understand him at all. "Don't worry, though. I've put some painkillers in the milk so I know it's going to taste a little odd. But it'll be good for you, okay?"

Mokona knew what painkillers were. Mokona had traveled with the others long enough to know their purpose, so why was Fai explaining it? And since when had Fai started speaking with a Welsh accent? Ten days of separation were not long enough for someone to acquire such a prominent accent.

The dots began connecting in Mokona's head as Fai picked Mokona up again, bringing a bowl of milk to the dimension hopper's mouth as though trying to feed a pet.

"Now drink up, alright?" he coaxed. "I'll take a look at your paw after that."

Mokona's heart sank as it realized that this man was not Fai. Maybe he was this world's Fai but then... Mokona's friend would not have been able to come here, and Mokona knew the magic it had sensed had belonged to the magician. So its friend could not be dead. Given the fact that two versions of the same soul could not survive in the same world, this must be the other twin. Cavahall's version of the real Fai. Did this Fai lose his brother too? Maybe if Mokona explained the
situation to him, he could help Mokona find its friends.

"Are you Fai?" Mokona asked in a tiny voice, hoping he would not call those nasty men to capture Mokona. The blond stiffened, his eyes going wide for a fraction of a second before becoming devoid of all emotion.

"You can talk," was all he said as he put the bowl away. He adjusted his grip on Mokona with both hands, making it difficult for the dimension hopper to escape. Mokona squirmed as the man brought it up to his eye level. "What are you then? Some sort of psychic Elemental-animal hybrid?"

"Mokona is Mokona."

"Mokona, huh?" The man quirked a brow before turning Mokona over. Mokona let out a tiny squeak as the man began prodding at its fur and ears, turning it completely upside down at one point. "Where did you come from? Are you one of The Company's experiments?"

"Stop it!" Mokona cried, feeling dizzy from all the poking and the turning. "Mokona is not an experiment."

"I don't see any identification tags on you," he said. "Are you some sort of exotic pet?"

"Mokona is not a pet," the dimension hopper insisted. "Mokona is just Mokona. And Mokona is looking for Mokona's friends."

"There are more of you?" the man sounded interested now, though there was an almost sinister edge to his smile. Mokona decided that it did not like this version of Fai very much. Fai was supposed to be nice.

"No, there is only Mokona in Cavahall," Mokona answered. "Mokona's friends are Kurogane and Syaoran and… Fai. But you are not Fai."

"I'm afraid not, little friend." The man shook his head. "But I can help you look for them if you want."

"Syaoran gets very sick if he stays in one world for too long," Mokona admitted, its ears drooping as the dimension hopper thought about its friends. "Mokona takes everyone to a new place when Mokona's earring glows. But Mokona can't find anyone even though Mokona looked everywhere. Then Mokona sensed Fai using magic but when Mokona got there the dogs attacked."

"You're friends with a Magirius?" he asked, narrowing his eyes again. "Is he a part of The Liberalists?"

"No. Everyone is just a traveler."

"Travelers, huh?" The man smirked, setting Mokona down on the bed again. "They shouldn't be too hard to find, then."

"You'll help?"

"Of course, didn't I say I would?" He chuckled, gently nudging Mokona towards the bowl of milk. "Someone traveling with a Mokona would certainly be an interesting person to know. I'd love to meet all of your friends. Now drink up. I can't help you look for them if you're so weak."

Nodding, Mokona began to drink, making a face the unpleasant aftertaste.
"Nasty, isn't it?" The man laughed. "It won't work if you don't finish it, though."

"Can Mokona have an apple after this?"

"Can your stomach even handle solid food?"

"Of course!" Mokona declared, finishing off the bowl in one gulp. "Mokona is awesome like that."

"All right then." He chuckled, ruffling the fur on Mokona's head as he stood up. "I'll go find some apples for the awesome Mokona."

"And then can we look for Mokona's friends?" the dimension hopper asked.

"I'll see what we can do about that," he said as he collected the tray and started for the door. He paused near the threshold for a moment, throwing a tiny grin over his shoulder as he looked back as Mokona. "I forgot to introduce myself earlier, by the way. I'm Yuui."

-0-

"Congratulations!" Nixon announced as he stepped back into the interrogation room. Kurogane had been tied there for nearly half a day with nothing but walls to glower at. Irritated by Nixon's cheerful tone, he threw the other man his nastiest glare. "Tomoyo has decided to give you the benefit of the doubt?"

"Benefit of the doubt?" Kurogane repeated. "It took you an entire day to reach that decision?"

"Technically speaking, it only took us about seven hours," the man pointed out, unfazed by Kurogane's menacing tone. "Is everything a fucking joke to you?"

"Well," Nixon grinned as he approached Kurogane, stopping only a foot away, "now that you mention it, Tommy does keep telling me that I need to be a little more serious." He began digging around his jacket. "Though just between you and me, I think Tommy is more than serious enough for the both of us. Ah, here we are." He pulled out a key before turning his attention towards Kurogane.

"I'm going to let you out now, but you're going to be cooperative and do as you're told, all right? Tomoyo has agreed to help you search for your companions. If you're telling the truth, that is," he added as an afterthought. "Just know that if this far-fetched tale of yours is a lie, you're really going to wish you'd never come here. Tomoyo has a... shall we say, a very vindictive streak."

"Are you gonna keep babbling all day or will you let me out already?" Despite knowing that this Tomoyo was nothing like the ones he had previously come across, Kurogane was still a little unnerved hearing her referred to as vindictive.

"You still have to agree to the terms."

"I'll cooperate," Kurogane grunted.

"Great." Nixon moved behind Kurogane, fiddling around with something at the back of the chair. A series of beeps followed a click of a key before the metal bands snapped open. "Now, Masooma has ordered me to bring you straight up to the medical bay, so we'll be going there first. Once she has poked at you to her heart's content, you can give me a description of your companions and I'll send out an alert for them."
Kurogane flexed his wrist as he stood up, wondering why this man was acting so relaxed in his presence. Even if they were choosing to believe him, with the way they had been treating him earlier, Nixon seemed oddly careless now, turning his back to a possible enemy. Kurogane knew that the man had bionic implants in place of his eyes, but he doubted that Nixon could actually see through the back of his own head.

When two armed men joined their party outside the door, Nixon's behavior began to make more sense. He was confident in the abilities of these men to keep Kurogane under control. Or maybe he was just confident they'd be able to shoot Kurogane before he could try anything since they were both carrying one of the bigger models of guns. Kurogane noticed some additions to the design that didn't appear to be a part of the standard-issue weapon she'd seen being carried around by Cavahall's soldiers. He wondered if Nixon was responsible for any of those. He did seem to be quite a tech-head.

The armed men kept pace a few steps behind Kurogane, bringing up the rear of their party as Nixon led them up a flight of steps. Kurogane hated to admit it, but even the climb up one set of stairs left him gasping for breath. He was completely out of shape, though being shot in the chest repeatedly would leave others bedridden for a lot longer. But it still bothered Kurogane that he was tiring so easily. How was he supposed to look for the others if he couldn't even climb up a set of stairs?

Nixon slowed once they reached the top, leading them down a long hallway. He must have noticed Kurogane's weakness, but the other man didn't offer him any help, letting Kurogane retain what little of his dignity remained. For that, he was grateful.

Pushing past a set of double swinging doors, Nixon led Kurogane outside into the dreary streets. All around them, the blackened shells of skyscrapers appeared to reach out towards the sky like skeletal fingers. Unlike what Kurogane had seen of Cavahall before the raid, he could scarcely spot any holographic screens hovering above their heads. However, he did see the remains of several broken projectors. The streets were wider here. Enough for people to ride around in spherical contraptions and still leave enough room for people to walk.

Pedestrians gave them curious stares as they passed, though many stopped to gape at Kurogane, specifically once they had gotten a closer look. Nixon was still walking at a slow pace so as to not tire out his charge, but Kurogane had to wonder if the medic had asked Nixon to make Kurogane walk all the way. He doubted the exertion was doing his insides any good.

The whispering began once they turned a corner, and Kurogane didn't even have to strain to pick up on the familiar name being murmured behind them. He wondered how much these people knew about him. Did they know he wasn't Steel, or did they think their leader was back from the dead? A few of the passerby attempted to talk to them but Nixon waved them off, picking up their pace once again. The armed guards closed the distance between them at his back and Kurogane realized that they were there for his protection as well.

"Don't mind those guys," Nixon said as they arrived at the entrance of a building. "They like to gossip. Give it a day or two and they'd have found something new to talk about."

Kurogane said nothing as spots of blackness danced across his vision. It took all his concentration to keep walking without tripping over his feet. His missing arm didn't exactly help matters with his poor balance either, but so far, he had managed not to stumble as he followed Nixon. The insides of this building appeared far cleaner than the streets outside, the air heavy with the stench of disinfectant. This was probably the medical bay.

"Hmm, I wonder where Masooma is right now," Nixon said to no one in particular as he waved his hands in the air. Unlike the last time Kurogane had seen the man do it, no holographic screens
appeared in the air before them. But Nixon kept flicking his fingers as though manipulating something visible only to him. For all Kurogane knew, it probably was, because only a moment later, the man let out a triumphant sound. "There she is. All right guys, let's go," he said, moving with a purpose as he led them to an elevator. "She's checking up on a patient on the third floor."

"When do I get my arm back?" he asked once they were all safely inside the lift. He silently cursed his labored breathing.

"That's up to Tommy, really," Nixon replied, shooting him a semi-apologetic look. "I did say we were giving you the benefit of the doubt, not the benefit of weapons you can use against us."

"How does me keeping my arm really give me any benefits?" Kurogane fumed. He could barely stay upright.

"It doesn't in your current state," Nixon replied. "But once you get better, it'll be kind of hard to wrestle it back. I suppose we could always just tranquilize you and take it off but I'd prefer to avoid that hassle if I can."

"You can't do this."

"On the contrary," Nixon said, "you'll find that we can. After you." He swept a hand towards the door as the lift arrived at its destination. Shooting him a glare, Kurogane stomped outside. The effect was ruined when he ended up having to clutch at the wall right outside to keep from falling over. Nixon hurried over to help him but Kurogane pushed him away with an irritated grunt.

"I'm fine."

"You look ready to keel over," Nixon said, hovering next to him as Kurogane tried to get over the sense of vertigo.

"I said I'm fine," he barked. Luck, it would seem, wasn't on his side, for the world then tilted on its axis, sending Kurogane crashing to the floor. He heard the sound of running footsteps somewhere in the distance before everything faded away.

"What kind of an idiot makes a man in his condition walk all the way?" a woman hissed somewhere nearby. It took Kurogane a moment to identify the speaker as Masooma. A heart monitor beeped steadily, letting him know that he was back in the infirmary. "I admit you're brilliant at what you do, but you're still an idiot."

"On the bright side, I got him here in one piece," Nixon pointed out hopefully. Still feeling tired, Kurogane kept his eyes closed. His eyelids felt like they were weighed down by lead, and Kurogane wasn't sure if he would even stay awake for long.

"Cute," Masooma chuckled, "but that doesn't let you off the hook. You're still sleeping on the couch tonight."

"What?" Nixon yelped, before he heard the sound of flesh being hit. "Hey, what was that for?"

"Keep your voice down; you'll wake him," Masooma warned him in hushed tones and Kurogane decided that she must have hit Nixon. "The interrogation was necessary, I know, but did you guys have to go all out on him? He's still recovering."

"You'll have to take that up with Chu'nyan," Nixon replied. "As it turns out, Kurogane here is immune to her, which naturally pissed her off. So she decided to, as you put it, go all out on him."
"Well, at least he's stable now." Masooma sighed. "Why are you here, by the way? I'm still working on him."

"I need to talk to the guy."

"Right now?"

"The sooner the better. I need to get a description of his companions. Tomoyo doesn't fully trust him, but she's agreed that if he's got others like him, it'd be better to have them all in a place where we can watch them. And if he's telling the truth..." He paused. "He made it sound pretty damn important that we find them as soon as possible."

Kurogane had nearly drifted off to sleep again, but the mention of his friends sent a shock of awareness through him. He couldn't sleep now because the others were still out there and he needed to get to them. These people were offering to help him. He had to let them know that he was awake enough to talk.

"I understand," Masooma said, but Kurogane found it a little hard to focus as he concentrated all his energy into trying to open his eyes. It felt as though his eyelids had been glued together. "But he's still asleep right now. I'll send for you when he wakes up."

"No. Wait," Kurogane whispered. His eyes burned as he finally managed to open them. Turning his head, he looked at the pair beside his bed. His throat felt parched, but he didn't bother asking for water. This was more important. "I'll tell you now."

"All right." Nixon nodded, pulling up a plastic chair next to his bed before sitting down. "Start with their descriptions."

"The kid, Syaoran, he's got brown hair and eyes like hers." He jerked his head towards Masooma. "He's five feet eleven inches tall, with a tan complexion and athletic build. The mage, Fai, is blond, blue-eyed. Six feet two inches, pale and more on the skinny side. Mokona is like a white meat-bun, long-eared with a red jewel on its forehead. It's small enough to fit into my palm." He briefly wondered if they even understood Mokona's description. The creature was one of only two that he knew of.

"You're traveling with a magician?" Nixon asked, giving him a sharp look. "Why didn't you mention this before?"

"I'm traveling with two," Kurogane corrected. "The kid's a mage too. And I didn't think it was important at the time."

"Well now, this changes things." Nixon said, getting to his feet.

"What? You're starting to believe me all of sudden?"

"Nope. But you mentioning your companions' Unnatural status gave me a couple of ideas on where to look for them. You said you saw them during the raid. Were they behaving oddly back then?"

"I don't think the mage even saw me." Kurogane grunted. He felt his eyelids slide close of their own accord and he had to fight to stay awake. He couldn't fall asleep again. "The kid didn't seem to recognize me at all."

Nixon frowned and Kurogane felt his heartbeat speed up.

"What is it?" he asked, trying to keep the hope out of his tone.
"Like I said, I think I know where to search for your friends. If you're telling the truth that is."

"I'm not lying!"

"Great, I'll go see what I can dig up then. He's all yours, Masooma."

And then, without waiting for a response, Nixon raced out the door, leaving a suddenly-very-tired Kurogane behind. As he let sleep take him in its embrace once more, Kurogane could only hope that the information he had provided about his companions would be enough for Nixon to locate them.
3 Days Later:

Syaoran flinched as the needle punctured his neck. He waited in silence as Emeraude pushed on the plunger. The strange silver liquid burned as it mixed with his blood, spreading inside his body like a parasite. He grit his teeth in an attempt not to fidget as the burn intensified. Half a minute went by before the nanites were completely assimilated into his body, and he felt the burn recede.

"Is it done?" asked one of the two strangers in the room. Syaoran risked a glance at the man from underneath his bangs, frowning when he realized that the man looked familiar. The dark haired woman beside him looked familiar as well, but when he tried to recall who they were, the bells grew louder and Syaoran abandoned his attempt at remembering.

"Yes," Emeraude replied, sounding oddly subdued. "His medication is to be given to him twice each day. Even a single skipped dosage can trigger a relapse, putting him and those around him in danger. I will also require him to visit me every fortnight for a check-up. Depending on his response to the medication, I may have to increase the dosage."

"I'll keep that in mind." The man nodded. "Now if you wouldn't mind doing the honors, I think our friend would like to be rid of that jacket."

Emeraude nodded stiffly, giving Syaoran an apologetic smile as she began to unstrap the straitjacket. Syaoran wondered why she refused to meet his gaze as she undid the buckles. She helped him slide out of the jacket. Syaoran flexed his muscles, stretching his arms above his head as he heard a few joints pop. Looking to his right, he noticed the man and his companion observing him with interest.

"So," the man drawled, "I heard you had a brief stint with The Company."

"I, uh… can't recall much beyond waking up here."

"Is that so?" The man scratched his chin in thought. "Am I to believe you have no memory of how you were captured by The Company or how you were rescued and brought here?"

"No."

"I see." The man fell silent, watching him with keen eyes as seconds ticked by. Feeling a little self-conscious, Syaoran dropped his gaze to check his state of dress. His cream colored pants and blue shirt were both speckled with dried blood. Possibly from all the times he'd thrown it up when Emeraude had tried feeding him.

"Here, Syaoran." Emeraude approached him with fresh clothes, surprising him with the use of his proper name. She had always called him 'Little One' before. He wondered if the sudden switch in forms of address was due to the newcomers. The older vampire was treating him in a distant manner. Was it because she didn't want these people to know how close she had gotten to him?

"You can change your outfit and clean up over there."

"Thank you, Emeraude." Syaoran smiled, taking the clothes from her hands before walking towards the door. He heard the man tell his companion to remain in the room before asking
Emeraude to step outside with him for a moment. Syaoran closed the door behind him, setting the stuff on a wooden cabinet set next to the wall on his right. Looking around, he noticed that a wooden tub had already been filled with water for him to wash with. Steam rose along its clear surface in translucent swirls.

Syaoran slipped out of the dirty clothes and approached the mirror. Wiping the condensation that had collected on its cold surface, he stared at the tired face looking back at him. His skin was pale, much more than it was supposed to be, dark circles ringing his eyes like pale imitations of bruises. Greasy hair and a week's worth of stubble only added to his unkempt appearance. Looking lower, he noticed the five circular scars on chest, right where his heart was.

Ignoring the bells as they began to toll once more, Syaoran reached up with trembling fingers to trace the marks. He couldn't recall how he had gotten them but he suspected it had something to do with how he'd become a vampire. How had he turned into a vampire? He had been traveling with someone, hadn't he? Was one of his companions a vampire? Had they turned him? Why? Had he asked to be turned?

His ears rang as more and more questions presented themselves, the tolling bells rising in intensity as he tried remember. He should know those things. His head spun, tremors wracking his body, forcing him to lean against the cabinet for support. Dark spots danced across his vision, letting him know that he'd pass out if he tried to force himself any further. Gritting his teeth, Syaoran released the memories he knew were lurking just a little out of his reach. It all stopped as soon as he let go.

Unable to look at the gaunt face in the mirror, Syaoran let his gaze drop to the cabinet, noticing only now that Emeraude had left him things to shave with. Sighing, Syaoran set to cleaning himself up.

When Syaoran stepped back outside after a quick bath, the man and his companion were both seated on his bed but Emeraude was nowhere to be seen.

"You look younger without all that hair on your face."

"Thank you, I guess?"

"Don't mention it kid." The man chuckled. "Emeraude's briefed me about your condition. I'm sorry to hear that you've lost your memories, Syaoran."

Syaoran knew he did not look young enough to warrant being addressed as 'kid' but surprisingly enough, he did not seem to mind it at all. Being called that felt… familiar.

"Have we met before?"

The man gave him a pitying look. "You really can't remember. I guess it's no use hoping for miracles. This is Souma; she's the one that saved you and brought you here. And since you don't remember me either, I guess I'll just introduce myself as well. I'm Touya. We met you in Cavahall during one of our operations last year."

"Thank you for saving me." Syaoran bowed to the stoic woman. "I'm Syaoran."

"We know that, kid." Touya chuckled. "We still have our memories."

"Sorry." Syaoran felt his cheeks heat up.

"Don't worry about it." Touya waved his hand dismissively as he stood up. "Now, come on. I promised you a tour of our facilities the last time we met. But you decided to drop off the face of
the Earth soon after, so we never got the chance. It's a good thing Souma found you when she did. Can you imagine ending up in one of The Company's programs?"

Despite the man's familiar manner, Syaoran felt like there was something off about Touya's behavior. Sadly, he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was almost like the man was behaving in a way he normally shouldn't be. But how could he possibly know that? He couldn't remember anything. On the other hand, Touya probably knew him. He did just say that they knew each other from before, didn't he?

So maybe he could just ask Touya about it.

"Touya, can you tell me something about me from before?"

"Back when we last met, you mean?" he asked, leading the way toward the room's exit. Souma walked silently next to his side, posture stiff as though watching for hidden threats.

"Yes. Were we friends?"

"I would like to think so. Unfortunately, we didn't really get much of a chance to spend a lot of time together. I only know what you told me about yourself. You were a very… private person."

"I see." He lowered his head, disappointment coloring his tone.

"Hey, hey. Why the long face now kiddo? Didn't I say I'll tell you what I know?"

"Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize for everything." Touya chuckled as they walked down a short corridor before reaching a set of stairs that went upwards. Syaoran realized he had been kept underground all this time as they emerged on top of the stairs that led outside through a pair of glass doors. "Like I said, you were a private person, so I don't know much. You did tell me you had four sisters. But they were killed in one of the raids. You were living alone when we met. A bit of a lone wolf, if I recall correctly. You did have a massive crush on Souma over here though."

"What?" Syaoran yelped, blood rushing to his face in mortification when Souma froze in her steps just as they stepped out into the sunlight.

"Oh yeah." Touya laughed. "You were like a little puppy, following her all over the place trying to get her attention."

Syaoran wondered if it was possible for vampires to spontaneously combust in the sunlight because—judging from the heat he could feel pouring off of his skin—he was pretty sure he should be turning to ashes. Souma was an attractive woman with dark exotic features. Sadly, not only was she several years older than him, she also had black eyes. Syaoran got the feeling that he would have been more attracted to someone with green eyes. Touya couldn't really be serious about his crush, right?

"Touya, don't mess with his head." Souma finally spoke. "He doesn't need you telling him things that aren't true."

To Syaoran, she sounded just as stern as she looked, but Touya merely grinned.

"Fine, fine, but did you hear the brat squeak? It was hilarious."

"You can ignore him when he's like that," Souma said. "He's just having fun at your expense. And
"Right, well. Moving on," Touya clapped his hands once before gesturing around them, "this is the residential area for the Scavenger administration. All the other members live in the apartments over there. Most of the residents here work in the Cerellium mines, but we've got other jobs available around here, too. We're a close-knit community that likes to stick to our own, so most of the people here don't like heading out into Cavahall. They're all free to leave whenever they want, of course, but few ever do."

Syaoran looked around, taking in the little stone cottages that were set aside for the administration. Each house had a small, square patch of dirt in front that served as a garden. A cobblestone path connected each cottage to the central road, also made of cobblestone. The road led up to a square, which was where Touya appeared to be leading them.

"This is the central square where most of the public meetings are held. You can log in your complaints and problems with the administration at the end. There's one in the afternoon today. You're welcome to sit in if you want."

"Thank you."

"You're a polite brat." Touya laughed. "I like that. Over there to our left is our marketplace. Anyone can open up a stall there if they've got the skills for it. Even miners can open one, provided they log their required hours at the mines, but what they do in their free time is all up to them. Come, I'll show you around."

Syaoran followed after the man, noting the way Souma still seemed to scan the crowds for hidden threats. Was she just paranoid or should Syaoran be on alert as well?

People eyed their little group with wariness, though Syaoran could detect a hint of curiosity in their gazes as they walked through the market. Vendors had set up collapsible stalls, selling all sorts of items ranging from sweets and confectioneries to meat cuts and vegetables and canned items. Some even sold clothing and footwear. Syaoran spotted a couple of stalls selling electronic gadgets that looked oddly high-tech in contrast to their medieval surroundings.

"Eagle," Touya said as he stopped in front of a stall set up by a blond man. "The resident monster wants a new set of holo-decks. See that you deliver those to her before we have another code blue at our hands."

"Again?" Exasperation was clear in Eagle's tone as he looked at Touya. "What does that brat do with them? I gave her my best pair last month!"

"Who knows." Touya shrugged. "She might just be having them as dessert for all I know. Monsters will be monsters."

"Don't you think Meilin is a little too old for that nickname?" Souma quirked a brow. Syaoran stood off to the side, watching the three of them interact, a little surprised to see how normally Eagle appeared to be treating Touya. Up until that point, nearly everyone in the market had been giving them a wide berth.

"It's like I say, Souma, once a monster, always a monster."

"Who's the newbie?" Eagle asked, finally noticing Syaoran standing behind the pair.

"You remember Syaoran, don't you?" Touya grabbed him by the arm and pulled him closer to Eagle's stall. "He's that loner from Cavahall. Kid's got amnesia, so I'm giving him a tour of the
place. Syaoran, this is Eagle. He's one of the—"

Time seemed to slow down for him as he felt the hair raise at the nape of his neck. Adrenaline flooded his bloodstream as he sensed something huge headed in their direction from the corner of his eye. Reacting on instinct, he pushed Touya out of the way. His body went on autopilot as he flipped to the ground. His legs flew through the air and slammed into the boulder headed toward their group. Pain erupted all along his right leg as he felt the bone shatter.

Time sped up once more as a cloud of dust and smaller rocks rained down on Syaoran as he fell to the ground.

"Souma!" Touya barked and Syaoran saw the woman vanish in a cloud of black smoke.

"Holy Hell!" Eagle jumped over his upturned stall and approached Syaoran as he lay panting on the ground. "Is he okay?"

"My leg," Syaoran gasped as he struggled to sit up. His eyes watered from the pain. He got a brief glimpse of the mess that was his right leg.

"Don't move," Touya ordered, pushing him back down. A crowd began gathering around them, indiscernible murmurs coming from all directions, making Syaoran's head spin. "Eagle, grab some blood from Emeraude for him. I'll align his leg before the bone begins to heal."

Eagle jumped to his feet with a nod before vanishing into the crowd. Syaoran bit back a whimper as Touya got to work.

"Thank you." Touya whispered so softly, Syaoran barely caught the words. His fingers shot sparks of pain through his leg wherever they touched and Syaoran had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from screaming. He could feel the bone fragments grating against one another even as the breaks began to reconnect. Touya shot him a sympathetic look, though he did not stop. A man stepped through the crowd to hand Touya a couple of metal poles and some ripped cloth. Probably taken from one of the stalls. Touya used it to make a splint for Syaoran's injured leg.

Just as he was securing the knots on the cloth, Souma reappeared in a cloud of black smoke, though she had someone with her this time. The man was short and bald with a rather impressive girth around the middle, and she had his arms restrained behind his back. His lower lip bled freely and the left side of his face was rapidly turning a nasty shade of purple even as he struggled in Souma's grip.

"That looks bad." Souma cringed as her gaze settled on Syaoran's injured leg.

"We just need to get some blood in him. It'll be fine," Touya replied as he stood up. "Eagle's getting it now." His eyes narrowed on Souma's prisoner who was cursing them horribly. "Is this him?"

"I caught him at trying to sneak into the mines. Tried to put up a fight, but didn't even bother denying that he did it."

"What does it matter?" the prisoner spat. "You'll kill me anyway."

"If you can prove you weren't the one who just put several lives in danger, I'll let you go unharmed," Touya promised coldly.

"What about all the lives you're putting in danger?" the man snarled. "Selling off the Cerellium we mine to The Company, acting as their little lapdog while pretending you've got everything under control here with the Scavengers?"
"Did you, or did you not just attack?"

"So what if I did? Tell your little bitch to let go of me and I'll do it again."

"You're not happy with the way I run things around here." Touya took a couple of steps toward the attacker, who paled as the man towered over him. Touya had not raised his voice at all, yet the crowd watched on with bated breath. Feeling the bone begin to heal, Syaoran struggled into a sitting position. "I can understand that. I can even understand you wanting to take over because you believe you can do it better."

"Damn right I can! You dare to call yourself an Unnatural?" The man spat a mouthful of bloody saliva at Touya. "You're a traitor and a disgrace to our kind."

"Right." Touya blinked once, calmly wiping the spit off his face. "So you thought it was wise to try and assassinate me in the middle of a crowded market? Were you hoping that the crowd would keep you hidden or did you just want a lot of witnesses for when you succeeded in taking me down? Did you even stop to think for a second that were you to miss you'd end up killing someone innocent?"

"I knew where I was aiming. If the brat hadn't pushed you out of the way, you'd be a stain on the cobblestone by now."

Syaoran watched the proceedings in silence as his thoughts raced. *Touya* was the boss Emeraude had mentioned before. He should have realized it earlier, but the man had appeared so normal. Nothing about the way he had been treating Syaoran had made him feel afraid or uncomfortable, yet Emeraude had always sounded scared of him. As he watched Touya interact with the would-be assassin, he could see why his enemies might fear him. But what had he done to Emeraude to make her so afraid? Syaoran frowned as he analyzed the situation. He seemed to be missing something.

The leader of the Scavengers had personally wanted to show Syaoran around. Was that why Emeraude had suddenly become so distant to him? Or had she not known that Touya had known Syaoran from before. From the sounds of it, Syaoran had not been very friendly with the leader of the Scavengers, so why was Touya putting in the effort to help him now?

"Lantis," Touya addressed the man that had brought him the splint, "move up the time for today's meeting to ten minutes from now. I want every Scavenger in the square by then. I have an announcement to make. Those of you standing here, pass along the message to everyone you know. You have ten minutes. Now move."

In less than a minute, the entire market place was deserted, save for Syaoran, Touya, Souma, and the assassin. Eagle raced up the cobblestone path toward them with a metal canister. He paused for a moment to observe the prisoner before dropping on his knees next to Syaoran.

"Here," he twisted the cap off the bottle and handed it to Syaoran. "This should help you heal quicker."

The tang of blood hit his senses and Syaoran subconsciously felt his claws extend as he took the container. Hesitating for only a heartbeat, Syaoran brought it to his lips and downed the liquid in a couple of gulps. His rate of healing sped and he let out a sigh of relief as the pain began to subside.

"Eagle, see to it that Syaoran's leg is healed properly before you bring him to the square."

A cloud of black smoke enveloped Touya and Souma along with the assassin and they vanished right before their eyes.
"So you're a newbie, huh?" Eagle said, studying him with interest.

"Sorry?"

"You claws came out and your eyes flashed. Poorer control over your instincts usually indicates that you've been turned recently. You don't seem like the slow type to me."

"Yes. I mean, I'm new." He added hastily when Eagle quirked a brow. "Not slow."

"How'd it happen?"

"I-I... don't know," he admitted, feeling his frustration mount at his lack of recollection. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he remember anything? "Eagle, did you know me from before?"

"Before you lost your memories?"

Syaoran looked up at the man, a hopeful expression forming on his face as he nodded.

"Afraid not. I only knew you by name when Touya mentioned meeting you during a raid."

"I see." He tried not to let the disappointment show on his face.

Eagle must have noticed his expression, for he continued. "Don't worry though. I'm sure you'll remember soon. In the meantime, if you've got no place to go, you can stay with us. I think Touya was planning on making that offer anyway."

Syaoran said nothing, fixing his gaze on his splinted leg.

"Our ten minutes are nearly up. Touya won't like it if we're late for the meeting." Eagle got to his feet, holding out a hand for Syaoran. "I'll have to help you walk, so we should get going."

Nodding once, he allowed the man to pull him to his feet, flinching when pain shot through his right leg as he put pressure on it.

"Lean on me," Eagle instructed as he flung Syaoran's arm over his shoulder, helping him hobble down the path towards the edge of the market. A crowd was already beginning to gather. Syaoran tried to ignore the pang of emptiness inside him as he allowed the man to lead him towards the square. Maybe he just had to give his past a little time to unravel itself. So instead of dwelling on something he had no control over, Syaoran chose to focus on the present.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry for the delay between updates this month but I hope you guys are enjoying the story so far. Real life is taking up pretty much all of my time but I will continue posting whenever I get the chance. Next up, it's Fai's turn. Leave me a comment and lemme know your thoughts on Touya and his Scavengers. Also, what do you guys think will happened with Syaoran now that he doesn't have his memories anymore. Will he be able to get in touch with his friends?
Training

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fai grunted when he felt the sharp tip of a boot connect with his bare side. It had been three days since he had begun his “training” with Naba. The Company apparently thought she was qualified to train slaves, but to Fai, it appeared as though the bitch got the job because she loved torturing others.

He knelt on the floor, glowering up at the woman as she circled around him.

"You are nothing." She repeated the same words for the past three days. "Nothing but a worthless piece of property. You do not even have the right to a name."

"I have a name," he hissed. "And I'm not your property."

She paused, stopping right behind him. Her nails traced the ridges of his spine, making him flinch when she scratched some skin off. The wound wasn't deep enough to draw blood, yet it still stung. But only momentarily, as his vampire healing kicked in and the skin mended itself.

"You're pretty stubborn," she said as she walked around to face him. "But don't worry. We'll get you straightened out soon enough. Now tell me, do you really believe you amount to anything?"

Fai said nothing, glaring at the woman. The last time he had answered that question had not been a pleasant experience for him. The woman smirked, fingering the remote in her palm for a moment, and Fai had to resist the urge to flinch. As angry as he was and as much as he didn't want to give these people the satisfaction of hearing him scream, it hurt when she pressed that button. Xing Huo still stood silently in one corner of the training room, her gaze lowered to the floor, hands folded in front of her in a submissive gesture. He wondered why Naba brought her along in every session. All she ever made the slave-girl do was take Fai back to his cage and feed him her blood. She had no reason to stay in the room with them, hearing him scream as Naba tried to train him.

But Naba didn't appear to care for her slave. She simply ignored the woman for most part, which seemed to suit Xing Huo just fine. Fai had to admit her being there made him feel a little less alone. Having discovered that Syaoran had died in that ill-fated raid was not easy on his conscience. Even if he realized that he wasn't directly responsible for the boy's death, he knew he'd still played a part in it. True, he had been forced into doing it, but he had been the one to turn Syaoran into a vampire. Xing Huo had not been able to tell him about the circumstances surrounding Syaoran's death, or even how he had died for that matter. All she had been able to find out for him was that he had been killed somehow during the raid.

But even then, Fai felt guilty. Syaoran's mind probably wouldn't have been able to cope with all the changes being forced onto it in such a short amount of time. There was the price taking its toll, the vampirism and the lack of control that came with it, and finally the implants and subsequent mind-control. No wonder Syaoran had gone insane.

"Tell me, 224. What exactly do you think you can prove by defying me like this?" Naba asked in a tone as sweet as poisoned honey. "Do you want to show me that you can think for yourself? Is that it?"

"My name is Fai."
Naba's smirk widened. Electricity shot through his body as she activated the collar. Fai screamed as he fell to the ground, writhing as white hot agony ripped through his body. Fai nearly blacked out before she let go of the trigger, leaving him panting on the floor as he tried to get his trembling under control.

"Get up!" Naba barked.

As much as Fai wanted to remain lying on the cool marble tiles, he struggled to obey. Naba would only shock him again if she felt like he was taking too long. Fai got back into the kneeling position, clenching his fists by his sides as he tried not to topple over.

"Look at you." She jeered. "Acting all tough, pretending to have a sense of self and thinking that you actually matter. But as soon as I turn on that collar, you trip over your feet in your haste to please me. It's pitiful."

Fai remained quiet, knowing better than give her another excuse. His training had barely even begun, and he still had hours of torture to look forward to. Naba had given up on trying to force him into lowering his gaze when he refused to obey her that first day. She had nearly clawed his eyes out just to teach him a lesson he refused to learn. In the end, she'd settled for shocking him until he passed out. The next day hadn't been any different, although she didn't seem too bothered by his glares today. Fai consoled himself with the knowledge that he had not been the first one to give in. He would have loved telling her exactly what he thought of her and her training, but he wasn't too keen on getting electrocuted.

There were times when Fai wondered if maybe getting killed had been might have been a blessing for Syaoran. Death was certainly better than being forced to live like this. Not that Fai was contemplating suicide. He knew he could probably outlast this torture but between the two alternatives, he was almost glad Syaoran was no longer alive to suffer this humiliation with him.

Fai wasn't sure if there was any hope of rescue left for him. As resourceful and fearsome as Kurogane was, even he could not hope to go against the kind of army The Company had employed to protect its assets. And besides, how would the ninja even find him?

In order for Mokona to transport them from one world to the next, it needed to connect with its passengers on a magical level, or it would risk leaving them behind. Fai doubted Mokona would be able to establish its magical connection with him. With all the suppressants The Company pumped into the air inside the building, even Fai could barely feel his magic anymore.

"What is your name?" Naba asked as her nails scratched the fuzz of blond hair along his jaw. Using one pointed fingernail, she forced his chin upwards, meeting his gaze with a quirk of her brow.

Fai said nothing, staring mutinously at her, and she let go with an almost disappointed look. Watching her walk towards his back once again, he wondered if Kurogane would have reached Clow by then. With Syaoran dead, Mokona's earring would have stopped glowing. After all, it only glowed whenever Syaoran's stay in any world came to an end. So if the reason why they had to jump through worlds so often was removed from the equation altogether... why would it continue to glow?

Mokona had probably been with Kurogane when they'd arrived, so they both must know of Syaoran's death by now. And with Mokona being unable to connect with Fai, he was sure they'd have assumed the same for Fai. With nothing holding Kurogane there, the ninja would have headed to Clow to tell Sakura about what had happened. And once he had fulfilled his purpose there, Kurogane would go home.
"Are you really going to give me the silent treatment?" Naba laughed, completing the circle around Fai before coming to stand in front of him again. She toyed with the remote in her hand and Fai grit his teeth in anticipation of the pain. "Well, if you're changing tactics, I suppose I should do the same."

Fai blinked. What she does she mean by that?

All of sudden, Xing Huo collapsed on the floor, shrieking in pain. His eyes widened in shock before he jolted into action. Forgetting all about the proper protocol Naba had supposedly beaten into him two days ago, he clambered to his feet and raced to Xing Huo's side.

A visible spark of electricity jumped from Xing Huo toward him when he tried to touch her. He jerked back his hand, glowering at Naba. The woman merely smirked, waiting a little bit more before releasing the trigger.

"M-Mistress Naba..." Xing Huo sobbed, pushing herself into a kneeling position without any prompting. Fai reached out to support her trembling body, freezing only when Naba spoke up.

"Not so fast, 224."

"What do you think you're doing?" he hissed.

"Changing tactics," Naba replied in a manner that indicated Fai should have known the answer already. "You seem rather fond of 109."

Dread crept up in his heart as he suddenly understood. Naba had gotten Xing Huo to give him her blood every day, just so Fai would begin to care about the girl. With Syaoran out of the picture, she'd had nothing to use against him. So the bitch had created a weakness for Fai that she could exploit instead.

"No..." he gasped. Next to him, Xing Huo whimpered.

"Since you don't really seem to care about the pain I inflict on you, I have decided to try something different. Every time you try to resist or defy me, 109 over there will be punished instead."

"Mistress, p-please..." Xing Huo sobbed.

Naba smirked at Fai, ignoring Xing Huo. Her smirk widened as she held Fai's gaze, pressing down on the trigger. The collar activated and Xing Huo screamed.

"Speaking without permission?" Naba drawled once she had let go. Xing Huo's cries subsided. "You should know better than to let the actions of an untrained savage influence you, 109."

"You can't do this to her." Fai growled low in his throat, feeling anger bubble up in the pit of his stomach. He regretted his words when he heard Xing Huo cry out.

"It, 224, not her," Naba corrected him. "Now, let's try again, shall we? Take up your proper position."

Not wanting her to suffer on his behalf, Fai grudgingly left the crying slave's side to return to the middle of the room. Still glaring at Naba, he got down on his knees.

"Where do you look when in the presence of your betters?"

He had to take a deep breath to keep himself from screaming in anger. He had been one of the
strongest magicians in all of Celes and one of the best warriors in Shura. And yet, here he was, helpless. He hadn't been able to keep Syaoran safe, even though he had promised Sakura he'd look after the boy. And now, unless he did as Naba asked... Biting the inside of his cheek, Fai lowered his head, taking comfort in the fact that he had at least managed to protect Xing Huo from suffering on his behalf.

His head snapped up in shock when only a moment later, Xing Huo's shriek rang out in the room again.

"I looked down!"

"But you failed to answer my question," Naba replied. "I'd tread very carefully, 224. Lower you gaze."

Gritting his teeth, Fai did as ordered, wishing he could tear that smirk off her face. He had to settle for clenching his fists instead. He was at her mercy. Which was exactly what Naba wanted to teach him that day.

"Now, what is your name?"

Fai bit his tongue when the answer automatically jumped to his lips. He wasn't the only one getting punished for his defiance any more. He couldn't let an innocent woman suffer because he couldn't say something he didn't believe. He was a brilliant liar, so he could just lie through it all. Since when had he started taking pride in who he was? Wasn't he supposed to be an opportunist? Had he changed so much during his travels that he could not even revert to his old personality anymore?

Xing Huo's scream made the decision for him.

"224!"

Xing Huo continued to scream for a few seconds after he had yelled it out. Rubbing at the top of his head like a favored pet, Naba released Xing Huo.

"See? That wasn't so hard, was it?" she asked, playing with a few strands of his hair.

When Fai refused to reply, Naba dropped her hand so that it was level with his eyes. Her fingers started pressing down on the trigger slowly.

"No," he said through gritted teeth, praying it would satisfy her sick desires. His heart sank when she pressed the trigger, making Xing Huo shriek. "No, Mistress," he hastily corrected himself, his nails digging into the heels of his palms. If only he could use his magic right then. Or even the ability to unleash his claws.

"You're a quick learner, 224." She simpered, and it took all of his self-control to not hit her. "I like quick learners. What are you?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing what?" Naba prompted, clearly enjoying herself.

The remote was right there in her hand. All he had to do was reach out and snatch it from her.

"I am nothing, Mistress Naba," he spat instead.

He couldn't do it. His own life wasn't the only thing on the line anymore. If he failed, he didn't
even want to imagine what Naba would do to the poor slave girl. He clenched his fists hard enough that he felt the skin break under a few nails.

"Very good, my pet," she said, stroking his hair. "Who do you belong to? What is the purpose of your existence?"

"I—" He hesitated.

 Wouldn't admitting it out loud be somewhat akin to cementing the truth? He could deny it to his dying breath but saying it out loud would be like confessing that those words held some truth.

"Do you need some encouragement, 224?" Naba asked sweetly.

"No, Mistress."

"Then be a good little slave and answer the questions."

"I… belong to The Company, to do with… as they please." It was difficult to get the words past his lips, despite having heard them over and over again in the past few days.

"Hmm… No. I didn't like how you said it." Naba clicked her tongue, and he heard Xing Huo whimper. "I think you do need some encouragement, after all."

Xing Huo's screams reverberated all around him. Fai clenched his fists, feeling the blood seep from his injured palms when his nails dug deeper into his skin. It didn't matter what he did. Naba would continue to torture them, if only to drive it deeper just how helpless Fai was to do anything about it. She had the trigger. She had the power. And Fai? Kneeling on the floor in nothing but a pair of boxers and a collar around his throat… he was nothing.

Naba wanted to brainwash him into believing that garbage, just as she had with Xing Huo and perhaps countless others. But Fai knew better.

Xing Huo groaned weakly, barely conscious by the time Naba let go of the trigger.

"Now repeat it again," Naba ordered.

Years of traveling with Kurogane and Syaoran had taught him that he wasn't a worthless waste of space. He was a person. A human being. But he couldn't say that to Naba's face. He had to make this whole situation work out in his favor. These people were responsible for Syaoran's death. With Kurogane and Mokona no longer in that world, Fai was the only left that could do anything about it. He had to stay strong and bear it out. Giving in now would mean letting his friends down.

And he knew he couldn't do that. Syaoran hadn't deserved to die the way he had. The least Fai could do was find a way out and avenge him. And in order to do that, he'd have to remember who he was. He'd have to play along to keep Naba appeased, but he couldn't afford to break.

"I am nothing."

"Nothing that you want me to believe."

"My soul, my mind, my body…" are all mine. They belong only to me!"…belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

"Very good, 224," Naba cooed as she ruffled his hair. "You are a quick learner."

"You and I both know I don't believe any of that." The words were out of his mouth before he could stop himself. His gaze shot towards the fallen slave for a fraction of a second. Would she be
punished again?

"Oh, I'm not too worried about that." Naba chuckled. "Getting you to admit it out loud was the difficult part. Acceptance of that as the ultimate truth will come with time. Now repeat it again, 224."

Fai drew in a deep breath and held it for a moment. What she had said was true. Tell someone something long enough and they'd start to believe it. He knew it to be true from personal experience. But... This time it would be different. He would never believe something that he knew wasn't true. Focusing all his energy on the anger and the hatred bubbling inside of him, he worked on shielding his mind from everything that would happen in the "training" room from that point onward. As long as he remembered who he was, it wouldn't matter what they made him say.

"I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

*I am Fai D. Fluorite, and I am better than you.*

"And again." Naba smiled.

"I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

*I am the High Mage of the Royal Court of Celes, and I will never belong to you.*

"Very good, 224." Naba's fingers trailed across his back as she circled around him. Her hair tickled against his bare skin as she leaned next to his ear, resting her sharp nails against his collarbone.

"Say it again."

"I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

*I am a warrior, and I am free.*

"One more time, 224," she ordered, pressing her lips to the back of his neck.

"I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

*I will get out, and I will destroy you.*

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Chapter End Notes

Woohoo. Fai isn't ready to give up just yet. But the question remains, can he succeed? And more importantly, can he escape?
Eagle led Syaoran up to the center of the square, sitting him down on the stone steps before hurrying off with the promise that he'd be right back. Syaoran followed his path around the square towards the other side. Eagle stopped to talk with the man that Touya had addressed as Lantis earlier. They glanced in his direction a few times, but they were too far away for Syaoran to make out anything even with his vampire hearing. The sky overhead turned grey as clouds began to gather.

The new time for the meeting flashed overhead on a holographic screen, high enough to be visible all over the settlement. Looking around, Syaoran noticed that nearly everyone in the gathered crowd looked a little worried. More than a few people shot him suspicious glances, though no one approached. Syaoran spotted Emeraude amongst the crowd, but the elder vampire turned away and vanished in the throng of people. Syaoran felt a pang of worry hit him. Had he done something wrong?

Why was she avoiding him? Eagle must have told her about his leg when he'd gotten the blood from her. Why had she not come to check on him? She'd been treating him so nicely up until Touya had come to pick him up. Was it his past connection with Touya that made her uncomfortable? Why was she scared of Touya anyway? His contemplation was cut short when Eagle came to sit down beside him. Syaoran looked up and saw Touya appear in the middle of the raised dais with Souma and would-be assassin. A hush fell over the crowd when Touya stepped forward.

Syaoran eyed their prisoner, noting that he looked a little worse than when he had last seen him. The man was forced to his knees in front of Souma, who held him in place by digging her fingers into his shoulders. Syaoran thought her knuckles appeared a little bloody, and he had to wonder if the injury was from when she'd captured the man or from sometime during the last ten minutes. Glancing at the prisoner's black eye, Syaoran decided it was probably the latter.

"I'm sure you're all wondering about the sudden time change in today's meeting." Touya's voice rang across the clearing, amplified by loudspeakers. "Those of you in the market a short while ago witnessed it happen firsthand, but for those of you who don't know, this man right here," he paused, pointing to the prisoner at Souma's feet, "attempted to assassinate me."

Immediately the crowd broke out into murmurs, silenced only when Touya held up a hand.

"Ten years ago, I lost my little sister to the Scavengers in a raid," Touya said and for some strange reason, Syaoran's mind flashed to a pair of green eyes. The bells tolled once more and Syaoran had to shake his head to focus on Touya as he spoke. "I allowed those monsters to capture me in hopes of rescuing my sister, but by the time I got here, it was already too late. She had been put to work in the mines on level sixty-seven. The level that collapsed only a week after her capture, taking with it the precious lives of at least one hundred Unnaturals."

The silence that followed made Syaoran's unease grow as he watched the grim-faced crowd. Thunder rumbled overhead, heralding the oncoming storm.

"Every one of us here has lost someone they cared about. When I lost my sister, I made a promise to myself. I promised that I wouldn't let anyone else go through the pain I had. That I wouldn't let another brother lose a sister, or a mother lose a child, or a husband his wife. I promised to protect
whatever Unnaturals I could, no matter what it took. Three years later, I killed the bastards the Company had set up as the administration for the Scavengers. When I took over and made Scavengers something to call our own, I promised you a few things. Do any of you remember what I promised you that day?"

Syaoran scanned the crowd, watching people fidget in their places though no one spoke up. The silence seemed to suit Touya just fine as he continued only a moment later.

"I promised that you that I would keep The Company from sticking their noses in our affairs. No more humans gallivanting in here, acting like they own the place, own us! No more living underground in cages in condition most wouldn't even want for their pets, let alone other sentient beings. No more watching your friends or the people you care about die from sickness or for entertainment. I promised you freedom to live as you wish, own your own businesses if you wanted. I promised you a life free of The Company and followers. Now, I stand here before you with one question and one question only: Have I not delivered on what I promised you?"

Syaoran watched Touya step to the edge of the stage. The crowd still seemed to shrink on itself.

"I said, have I not fulfilled my promises?"

"You have," Eagle yelled.

"Have I?"

Murmurs and calls of affirmation started coming from the crowd, Touya repeating the question until nearly everyone had yelled out an answer.

"Some of you," Touya paused, turning his back to everyone as he approached Souma, leaning down to stare right at the would-be assassin, "feel as if I haven't. Crab here, is one of them."

"He's no different from rest of the lapdogs The Company sent over!" Crab yelled defiantly. "He's been selling Cerellium to those bastards all this time."

"An open secret," Touya countered calmly, and the whispers started once more. "Nearly everyone here knows about who buys all of our mined Cerellium."

"You promised us freedom from The Company," Crab snarled.

"And you think you don't have that?" To Syaoran, Touya appeared far too calm. As if he had already been expecting this confrontation for quite some time and was a little disappointed it had taken this long. "Tell me, Crab, when was the last time someone shoved you in an underground cage with twenty other Unnaturals? The last time someone threw you in an arena with the ultimatum 'kill or be killed'? "

"You may not be doing it to us, but you're doing it to all the Unnaturals that The Company enslaves."

Fai-san! A voice echoed in his mind, followed by the toll of those dreaded bells. Syaoran let out a surprised yelp, clutching at his head as it started to pound. Next to him, Eagle shot him a worried look.

"You okay?" he whispered.

"I'm fine," he mumbled, forcing himself to focus on Touya's speech. "Just a headache. Don't worry about it."
"What I do with The Company is wrong, I won't deny that." Touya said and Syaoran had to wonder if this was the same man that had been teasing him in the market only a short while ago.

"Then why won't you stop?"

"You want me to risk everything these people have for the sake of Unnaturals we don't even know?" Touya asked, incredulity coloring his tone as he leaned closer to Crab. "I promised to look out for the Scavengers because they're the ones I consider my family. You can't save everyone in the real world, Crab." He lowered his voice to a whisper and Syaoran only heard what he said next because of his vampire hearing. "If you could, my sister would still be alive."

"This world is all about survival of the fittest. I do things that are hard and at times immoral just so you can keep on living your lives in comfort. Yes, I sell Cerellium to The Company. But I also keep their noses out of what goes on inside the Scavengers. If you don't like the way I run things, you're all free to leave. I've never stopped anyone before, and I won't stop you now."

Syaoran watched the crowd, wondering how many of them would actually take Touya up on that offer. Knowing everything Touya had just confessed to, even he had half a mind to just walk out, but then again, he really had no place else to go to... Emeraude's sudden resentment of Syaoran seemed to make more sense now. She must have known the truth about Touya. Maybe she had become distant with him because she thought Syaoran was involved as well. He'd have to meet up with her and clear up the misunderstanding.

"I overlook things around here because I promised you freedom," Touya said when no one moved to leave, "but if there's one thing I won't tolerate, it's putting the people I care about in harm's way. Earlier this afternoon, in a misguided attempt to punish me for my dealing with The Company, Crab tried to use his gift to crush me under a boulder. But because he did not think his plan through, he chose to do so in a crowded marketplace. To make matters worse, his attempted assassination ended up breaking the leg of my friend Syaoran as he saved my life. Crab is a part of the Scavengers, and as such, he is a part of the people I consider my family. If he were an outsider, I would have ripped out his throat by now, but I don't attack my family. And I do not tolerate an attack against my family."

"Lantis, Emeraude," Touya barked out the names, and they stepped out of the crowd. "Crab is no longer welcome amongst the Scavengers. Escort him off the premises please."

Syaoran was a little surprised by such a mild punishment. He'd been expecting something harsher than exile. Cavahall was just a hundred kilometers away and from what Emeraude had told him, there was a faction in the city that protected Unnaturals. Crab could just go and join them. So Syaoran was quite shocked when Crab broke out of Souma's grip to fall at Touya's feet.

"No! Please, have mercy," he cried, even as Lantis and Emeraude took hold of his arms and pulled him back.

"Have mercy?" Touya scoffed and Syaoran watched on in confusion. What was so wrong with being exiled? "After what you just did, be grateful that I'm letting you leave."

"Please, you know I won't be able to survive beyond the boundary."

"What happens to you beyond the boundary is none of my concern." Touya freed his leg and stepped back with a sneer on his face. "Take him away."

Syaoran could hear Crab's cries for quite some time even as his two captors dragged him away
from the square.

"What's so bad about being exiled?" he asked, turning to face Eagle who was staring in the direction the trio had disappeared off to with a grim expression.

"Nothing's wrong with that. It's the part that comes after that's got him so scared."

"And what part is that?"

"You'll see," Eagle said, indicating the holographic screen hovering a fifteen feet above Touya. "Watch."

The projector that had previously been displaying an enlarged version of the proceedings now showed an open, downward sloping plane. A metal fence was visible halfway down the slope, probably marking the edge of the land owned by the Scavengers. The ground was black and lifeless beyond the fence, with just a few dry shrubs poking out from behind rocks here and there. In the distance, Syaoran could spot the tops of a few of the taller towers in Cavahall. Soon enough Emeraude and Lantis appeared, dragging Crab along with them who was, by now, openly groveling for them to let him go back. Lantis just appeared disgusted by the display while Emeraude refused to so much as even look at the man she was pulling along.

"I did it for everyone!" Crab cried, digging his heels in the ground as they drew closer to the fence. "I did it for all your sakes. Please don't do this to me. I was thinking of everyone."

"Touya thought of everyone as well when he struck that deal." To Syaoran's surprise, it was Emeraude that spoke, her voice void of any emotions. "You knew what would happen if you failed, yet you chose to go against him."

"Lan-Lantis, you know why I did it, right? Don't send me out there."

"You put on a brave front in the square," Lantis replied, "but the minute you're faced with the possibility of death, you turn into a sniveling mess. Touya would never even flinch with a gun pointed to his head. If this is all you had to offer us, I'm glad you failed."

Ignoring his pleas, Emeraude and Lantis shoved him over the fence with enough force to send him rolling a few feet downhill. Crab sat up, looking around him in confusion before his eyes widened in fear as he tried to scramble back to his feet. Even as Syaoran watched, sweat began to bead the fat man's brow as he stumbled towards the fence, his body literally beginning to turn red, his eyes bulging out of their sockets before he toppled over with a tiny squeak. Emeraude and Lantis watched the fallen man impassively, and Syaoran risked a glance at everyone around him, taking note of the expressionless faces in the crowd as they looked on.

Hearing a tiny boom, Syaoran's gaze shot back to the screen, just in time to see an explosion of crimson mist where Crab had fallen.

**Did Crab just... explode?**

"And that," Touya's voice was overly amplified in the wake of the silence, "is what I'll do to anyone who dares to endanger my family. You can drop your complaints or problems by Souma's office after dinner tonight. Meeting adjourned."

The crowd once again broke into murmurs as people began to disperse in groups of threes and fours. Eagle got to his feet while Syaoran remained frozen in place, trying to process what had just happened. Just what had he gotten himself involved with?
"How's your leg now?" Touya asked as he approached them on the stairs. Souma walked only a couple of steps behind him.

"I think the bone should be healed by now, but maybe he should stay off it for the rest of the day, just to be safe," Eagle suggested when Syaoran remained silent.

"Thank you," Souma smiled at him for the first time as she crouched in front of him. "For saving him today."

"Y-You're welcome." 

"If you ever need anything, just let us know." Touya grinned, reverting to the personality he had before the attempted assassination. "Speaking of needing things, you don't have any place to stay, do you? I mean, considering that The Company had you before Souma got you out, I'm pretty sure they'll want to get you back if you head into Cavahall."

"I guess..." he mumbled, wondering what he was supposed to do.

"And we can't have that happening to the guy I owe my life to." Touya shook his head. "Tell you what? Why don't you join the family?"

"That's a great idea!" Eagle clapped his hands once. "With Touya's protection, there is no way in hell that The Company would even think about coming after you."

"And you get a place to stay," Souma pointed out. "Plus you can visit Emeraude for a checkup if you feel unwell."

"I wouldn't want to trouble you." Syaoran replied, trying to politely decline. He didn't want to get involved in this mess any further then he already was. He got a feeling that there was something important that he needed to do. And there was also the problem with his memories and psychosis.

"Nah, I insist," Touya said, sitting down on the stairs to Syaoran's left. "I owe you my life. I don't like being indebted to people so by helping you out, I can return the favor."

Syaoran said nothing, thinking about everything he had learned so far as he tried to reach a decision. Touya was dealing making deals with the people that probably had a hand in Syaoran's current state. But, he seemed to genuinely want Syaoran around. And he had known Syaoran in the past before his capture. With no memories to go on, Syaoran really didn't know if he had some place safe inside Cavahall that he could stay at while searching for his past. And wouldn't it just be easier to get help from Touya anyway? If he knew him, the man would have clues on where Syaoran could start searching. Wouldn't it be better to have his protection while looking than to go around like a clueless idiot in a dangerous city?

And Touya had said that he wasn't stopping any of the Scavengers from leaving the mines if they wanted to. So if Syaoran decided in the future that he wanted something different, he could always just leave.

"If you're sure it won't be too troublesome," he finally said. "I guess I'd like that."

"Brilliant!"

Syaoran couldn't help but smile as the man pulled him to his feet, telling Souma to take them to Touya's house while they made more permanent arrangements for Syaoran's stay.
A/N: So, what do you guys think of Touya? And Syaoran's decision to stay with the Scavengers?
Fai kept his head lowered, sneaking glances at his surroundings from underneath his bangs as he followed after Naba. Her high heels clacked against the polished marble of the twisted hallways as she pulled him along with a chain attached to the shackles around his wrists. Outwards, Fai presented the perfect picture of a slave broken by the training sessions though inwardly, he was committing every twist and turn to memory.

He couldn't tell if his compliance to her methods had managed to convince her that she was breaking his spirit, but he was certain he was heading in the right direction. She had begun to let up on the torture during their "training" sessions, opting for the more encouraging approach. On more than one occasion, she had hinted at how pleased she was with his progress, though Fai inwardly scoffed each time she did so. He made sure to give her a meek response, thanking her for her generosity whenever she rewarded him with an extra meal for his obedience. It sickened him to have to put up with everything, but knowing that he was the only one left that could avenge Syaoran was what gave him the strength to keep up the façade.

He absently took note of the floor level as they ascended a set of stairs. As soon as they reached the floor landing, Naba led him down a narrow hall lined with white doors to the very last one. Through his bangs, Fai couldn't make out the name etched out across the door's surface, but he could tell that the blocky black letters that made up the words stood out in stark contrast to pristine white. He could hear the muffled sound of someone talking on the other side, but Naba didn't seem to care about the fact that the person on the other side was occupied, as she barged inside, tugging Fai behind her using the chain.

"—and how many times do I have to tell you tha— Naba, you're early!" The speaker stopped mid-sentence to address Naba. Fai dared not raise his head to look at the man. "Oh my, is this your newest pet? What do you call it?"

Cold fingers gripped his chin, lifting his head enough to let Fai catch a glimpse of the speaker's pointed nose before Fai lowered his gaze like a good little slave.

"This is 224, Sam." Naba replied as Sam let go of Fai's face to circle around him instead.

"Quite the pretty-boy you've managed to land yourself this time," Sam said in a lilting tone. Fai took in a sharp breath when he felt Sam's hand trail down his back to squeeze him once before letting go. Fai balled his hands into fists, mentally reminding himself that punching the man would most definitely earn him a round of electrocution from Naba. The man began to poke and prod at him, reminding Fai of farmers checking cattle in the village markets in Celes. "I don't know how you manage it, Naba, but I must admit I'm jealous. You always get to train such gorgeous specimens."

Fai was no stranger to physical contact, taking pleasure in the form of one night stands over the course of their journey but never had it been something given or taken unwillingly. Disgust coiled in his gut as he stood motionless in his place, allowing Sam to molest him, trying his best to keep in mind that breaking Sam's hand was not in his best interests. Still, when the man's hand came to rest on Fai's hip once again, Fai barely managed to control himself, clenching his fists harder to stay in place.

"How far along is its training?" Sam inquired. "I'm guessing it won't be starting the program for another couple of months, so aren't you bringing it to me a little ahead of schedule?"
"I've put 224 on the fast track," Naba announced and Fai's disgust intensified at the pride in her voice. "I've decided to start to start training it on the specifics starting tomorrow."

"And I suppose you will be partnering it with that bushy-haired slave of yours." Sam moved away from Fai towards the other side of the room. "Does this mean I won't be getting her in the near future? I happen to rather enjoy 109."

"You don't have to worry about missing out on your fun," Naba replied as she tugged at the chain connected to Fai's manacles and he slowly walked to stand next to her. He closed his eyes, reciting his mantra in his head to remind himself why he was putting up with the humiliation as she began to pet his head. "224 is far too special for something like that, so I'll be training it personally."

"It's attractive, I'll give you that, but are you sure it's wise to break that many protocols?" Sam asked, sounding alarmed by Naba's revelation. "You're already pushing the limits with putting 224 on the fast track. If Director Bia caught wind of what you were—"

"What Director Bia doesn't know won't hurt her," Naba snapped. Fai had no trouble picturing the cold glare on her face as she spoke, having been on the receiving end of that tone too many times himself. "You're not planning on ratting me out, are you, Sam?" Her voice grew soft though he could still pick at the dangerous undertones.

"Of course not," Sam replied a little too quickly as he fiddled with something Fai couldn't see. "I'm just a little envious of you, that's all. You'll be having fun breaking this pretty thing all on your own while I remain stuck in my office."

Fai bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from pointing out that he wasn't a 'pretty thing'. It irked him to no end to be treated as sub-human, having to hear them speak as if he was too stupid to understand that they were talking about him. He wanted nothing more than to tell them exactly what he thought of them, but he knew that hasty actions would only be detrimental to his escape plan. He had to get them to underestimate him so they'd let down their guard, providing him with the perfect opportunity to strike.

"Oh, come now, Sam, I thought you just told me you enjoyed 109."

"The females have their attractive features, no doubt, but do you really think I'd want to miss out on having some fun with something that looks like that?"

"Tell you what," Naba offered suggestively. "You make sure that you ink your best design on 224 today, and I'll see if I can work something out for you to have a go at it."

Fai had to fight off the shudder that traveled down his spine at that statement. Naba had mentioned earlier that she'd be having him entertain customers in no more than a fortnight, but he refused to accept that future for himself. Even without having her explain it to him, Fai knew what his training for the Pleasure Program might entail. If everything went according to his plan, he'd be breaking out of here long before she had a chance to force him into prostitution, but...he had a sinking feeling in gut. He didn't even want to consider the implications of the offer Naba had just made to Sam.

"If that's my incentive, you'd better be ready to make good on your offer, Naba." Sam laughed, sounding far more excited than Fai thought was appropriate. Fai heard a whooshing sound and raised his head a little to glance towards Sam. But he couldn't catch more than a glimpse of the holographic screen before Naba made a displeased sound in her throat and dug her nails into his scalp. Fai lowered his head with a pained hiss. She resumed patting his head when Sam spoke again. "This one is the hybrid, right? I may already have the perfect thing for it."
He wasn't sure of how he'd have to modify his plan to factor in this new development, since he still didn't have all the information he needed, but one thing was clear to him. He had less than a fortnight to finalize and execute his escape plan, all of which hinged on him gaining access to his magic once more.

His attention was drawn back to Sam, who was approaching them again. He heard another whooshing sound, no doubt Sam bringing another holographic screen into existence before Naba. Without raising his head, Fai tried to catch another glimpse of whatever it was that Sam was showing Naba, but the angle didn't allow him to see anything. Gritting his teeth, he settled for listening to what they discussed instead.

"This is a full back design," Naba said. "Are you sure you can get it all inked today?"

"You usually give me a little longer than that."

"I begin training it tomorrow, Sam," she said, a hint of impatience creeping into her tone. "Take all night, if you want, but that's all you get."

"Will it be able to take a continuous inking procedure?"

"It's part Vampirosa." She snorted, carelessly dismissing his worries as she dropped Fai's chain to move and stand in front of Sam. "I'm certain it will be fine by morning."

"Well, if you're sure, who am I to complain? Now, what do you think about the design?"

"I like it, but I think it would look better with a few adjustments."

Knowing that the time wasn't right for him to attempt an escape, Fai remained where he was.

The chemical compounds being continuously pumped into the air inside the building prevented Unnaturals from accessing their abilities, though The Company also seemed rather fond of using Cerellium collars and shackles as a secondary measure. Thankfully for Fai, the former no longer posed much of a problem for him. Ever since he had discovered how his captors managed to keep the Unnaturals from accessing their abilities, Fai had been working on a way to expel the airborne chemicals from his blood altogether, instead of using his magic to burn out the compounds like he had initially.

All that he needed to do after that was get rid of the collar and the shackles, which was proving to be a lot more time-consuming than the first half. It had been a fluke discovery, but Fai had realized that magic in very high concentrations could corrode the metal. Of course, summoning that much power drained his reserves and made it harder for him to keep expelling the airborne chemicals from his blood, but he was slowly eroding away the insides of his shackles and collar, weakening them from the inside where his captors wouldn't notice until it was too late.

But even with him devoting all his free time to the process, the metal bands were not yet weakened enough for him to break them off altogether. And the fact that he might not be able to free himself before something happened was what worried him the most.

Glancing towards Naba and Sam, Fai noticed that they were both occupied with the image that Sam had shown her earlier, with Naba directing Sam to make changes to the design according to her liking. Knowing that neither of them were paying him any attention, Fai took the time to assess his surroundings.

He took note of the tiny glass window that looked out on the ugly grey city of skyscrapers. The
walls were lined with polished wooden shelves at waist height, supporting an odd assortment of bottles and electronic devices. A few feet to his left was a plain metal table with leather bindings along its width. A series of light fixtures hung from the ceiling directly above it. Before he could ponder on their purpose, his attention was once again drawn towards Naba, who looked rather pleased with the thing developing before her eyes.

"That's perfect," she purred before turning to look at Fai, frowning when she noticed him looking their way. Fai immediately lowered his gaze, hoping she wouldn't consider his actions an act of defiance. He didn't want her to think that he was in need of another training session. The electrocutions usually left him far too exhausted to get any work done when he was alone. With the way things were moving along, he knew he couldn't afford to have any delays in his progress.

"224," Naba called out in a sharp voice and Fai pretended to flinch at the harshness.

"Yes Mistress?" he whispered, wondering what Kurogane would say if he could see him at that moment.

"Take off your shirt and lie down on the table, face down," she ordered, sounding a little less cross. So the act had mollified her to some extent. "Oh, and recite the litany as you do it."

Gritting his teeth, Fai took a moment to gather his patience as he gripped at the hem of his shirt and began to pull it over his head.

"I can't hear you, 224."

"I'm sorry, Mistress," he said, not wanting to rouse her suspicion. "I am nothing." He recited the words he had repeated countless times before. It came to him without any thought, the words rolling off his tongue without hesitation. "My soul, my mind, my body belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

"Very good," Naba crooned as she approached him, while Fai stood there with his hands tangled in the sleeves of his shirt. The shackles around his wrists were connected to one another, making it impossible for him to take the shirt off completely. Naba, however, did not seem to care about that as she patted his head before trailing her fingers down his scalp to scratch at the base of his neck. "Now get on the table and keep repeating it until I tell you to stop."

Biting the inside of his lip, he did as Naba had instructed, knowing that arguing against her would only serve to irritate the woman.

"I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

A blast of cold air hit his exposed flesh as soon as he climbed on the metal platform, realizing a little too late that it was situated directly underneath a ventilation shaft.

"I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

Goosebumps erupted all over his skin as he lay down on the cold metal.

"I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body belong to The Company, to do with it as they please."

Naba gripped his hands in her thin fingers, pulling them above his head before pushing the shirt down to his elbows so that the shackles were exposed.

"I am nothing. My soul, my mind, my body—" He fought back a shudder as his mind flashed back to the last time he had been strapped down to a table inside The Company. He clenched his eyes as
the phantom pain of the laser scalpel slicing into his neck returned.

He hadn't even realized he was beginning to show signs of hyperventilating until he felt Naba gently caress his back.

"There, there, 224, it's going to be okay," she murmured, and Fai would have laughed if the circumstances had allowed it. Ignoring her words, he tugged at his wrists, only to discover that during his little episode, she had completely strapped him down. "Now, I don't remember telling you to stop."

*I am a warrior and I will never belong to you. I will escape and I will destroy you.*

Latchng on to that promise, Fai repeated the words that Naba wanted to hear, again and again until Sam came to stand over him.

"That should be enough for now, Naba," Sam said as he pressed a moistened cloth against Fai's back, using it to wipe his skin. From the foul stench that emanated from the rag, Fai guessed the liquid to be some sort of disinfectant, though he wasn't certain why they would bother to use one on him, considering the fact that he was a vampire and, in their eyes, could probably heal from anything at all. "I don't need it jabbering away while I work, so if you could tell it to shut its pretty little mouth now that would be great."

"That's enough, 224."

Fai fell silent at her command, licking his lips in hopes of regaining some moisture. Despite being directly under a constant stream of cold air, he still felt thirsty, though he dared not ask either of them for water. He was certain Naba would find a way to humiliate him for making that request before complying. And even if he was tied down, Fai was far too stubborn to willingly subject himself to her degrading treatment.

He felt, rather than saw, Sam project something over the entirety of his back before the air came alive with a loud buzzing noise. Fai debated the pros and cons of lifting his head to check for its source, but Sam pressed something thin and sharp to the middle of Fai's back before he could reach a decision. He felt the vibrations spread out from the point of contact as the needle pierced his flesh and Fai inhaled sharply at the pain that radiated through his entire body every time the needle broke through his skin.

Clenching his hands into fists, Fai closed his eyes, pretending not to notice the stinging burn beneath his lids as Sam moved the humming needle to a new spot.

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Fai allowed the guards to drag him through the halls, letting his muscles go limp as they dropped him in a heap on the floor. The lift began to descend as they punched a combination into the keypad next to the doors. Fai carefully made note of the buttons they'd pressed.

"Pretty-boy isn't as tough as it likes to pretend after all," one of the men laughed as he used his foot to turn Fai onto his back. Fai bit back a hiss of discomfort as the cold floor made contact with the sensitive skin on his back.

Xing Huo had told him about The Company's policy regarding slaves in their pleasure program. Every single one of them was branded in a way that was supposed to make them more attractive to their future customers. The Company clientele, it seemed, appeared to prefer their sex toys with tattoos. Or maybe it was just The Company's way of advertising their ownership. Xing Huo hadn't
been clear on that. But whatever their reasons, Fai had just gotten his very own, customized, branding.

Getting a non-magical tattoo, he decided, was probably just as painful as getting a magical one. It hadn't exhausted him as much as he was pretending for the sake of the guards, though. He was certain he still had enough strength in him to take them both down before the lift halted. But the electronic locks at every doorway and corridor that he had been dragged through had been set to accept a series of alphanumeric codes from humans alone. Any Unnatural trying to access them would raise the alarms and bring the guards from the entire building down on them.

The guards grabbed him under the armpits, carelessly dragging him out of the lift as soon as they reached the floor containing the holding cells. They laughed and jeered at him all the way to his cage before shoving him in the enclosure. He waited for their footsteps to recede before pushing himself into a sitting position, crossing his legs underneath him as he reached for the tiny reserve of magic that he had been gathering all day.

Inhaling deeply, he released a small fraction of that power into his bloodstream in a sharp burst, burning out the compound from his body before pushing a thin but concentrated stream of magic through his skin under the Cerellium bands. Every couple of minutes he would pull it all back towards his core before releasing it out in a sharp burst to get rid of the compound building up in his blood before cutting away at the Cerellium. Fifteen minutes later, he began to feel the effects as he reached the limit of his magical reserves. Knowing he couldn't keep it up any longer, Fai released the hold on his core. Focusing his energy on building up his reserves, Fai gingerly pulled on the grey shirt that was still tangled in his arms.

The rough material irritated his sensitive skin but Fai grit his teeth and lay down on the cold floor. He felt rather pleased with his progress on weakening the Cerellium bands. One more session would leave them weakened enough to be broken with a little help from his vampire strength. An hour later, feeling satisfied with the level of magic in his core, Fai allowed sleep to take him.

He woke with a jolt, crying out in pain as electricity shot through his body.

"Good morning, pet." Naba grinned at him through the bars as she released the button, and Fai made a show of hastily getting on his knees and angling his head towards the floor, though not before noting that Xing Huo wasn't here again today. "Ready for your big day?"

Fai remained silent, knowing that was what Naba expected of him. He could hear the grin in her voice as she turned her attention to the two guards that had accompanied her, though Fai could tell from the way they moved that they weren't the same guards that had brought him to his cage the previous day.

"Take it down to the cleaning station and get 224 cleaned up before bringing it up to the training chambers." The bars to his cage fizzled out as Naba entered the pass-code, and he felt her fingers rub the top of his head like she would a cat's. "Today 224 starts the next phase of its training."

Fai remained where he was, letting the guards drag him out into the open before standing up. Naba was speaking again, but Fai tuned out her voice, paying only cursory attention to her as he focused his energy on building up his magical reserves instead. If she was ready to move on to the next phase of his 'training', he had to move up the time of his escape attempt.

The guards led him through the corridors towards the cleaning station, which consisted of a vast circular room with tiled walls and floor, with the floor sloping downwards from all sides towards the middle. The sides of the walls were lined with a series of flexible metal pipes at short intervals, with shower heads attached at their ends. Fai, who had stopped at the entrance to observe the room,
was shoved inside by the impatient guards.

"Strip," one of them ordered, and Fai balked.

"Excuse me?" Without Naba around to observe his behavior, Fai saw no reason to keep up the ruse of the submissive slave. Unlike the previous night, he knew he wasn't about to be left alone so there was no need to pretend.

"Naba wants you cleaned up, so strip, or we won't hesitate to hose you down with those clothes on. And if she punishes you for being the filthy Unnatural that you are…" The guard let his words hang in the air.

"I'm perfectly capable of washing myself." The next second, Fai was on the floor, screaming in pain as the guard activated his collar.

"Get up and strip, now!" the man barked and Fai pushed himself back on his feet. Leveling a cold glare at the guard, Fai pulled himself to his full height, squaring his shoulders as he stared down his nose at the man. Fai was secretly pleased to see that he managed to unnerve the guard. When the man tried to match his glare in an attempt to assert his 'dominance' Fai merely flashed his eyes to vampire gold. Fai smirked when the guard let out a tiny squeak, though he tried to cover it up with a cough.

The guard glowered at him and Fai backed off, if only because he did not want the man to shock him again. He quickly pulled off his shirt and the standard-issue trousers, standing on the tiled floor in nothing but his boxers, which seemed acceptable to the guard. Kicking away his discarded clothes, they grabbed his arms, leading him to the nearest shower. One of them pressed on a tile next to the pipe and a section of the wall swung open with a soft click to reveal a set of chains. The man brought those over, attaching them to the shackles on Fai's wrists before moving away as his partner let Fai go.

The shower that followed was probably one of the worst he had ever had during all his travels as the guards proceeded to hose him down with highly pressurized water at near-freezing temperature. One of them tossed a bar of low-grade, strongly-scented soap at Fai, motioning for him to lather it up. The chains clinked audibly as Fai caught the soap between trembling fingers, slowly rubbing it over his chilly skin before one of the guards sprayed him in the face.

"Hair too." He grunted and Fai grit his teeth to swallow his anger at the treatment as he rubbed the soap in his scalp. Fai had barely finished before he was being sprayed by the water again. Thankfully, the shower was over quickly as the guard that had yelled at him moved around Fai to press a different tile in the wall. Like the one with the chains, it revealed a small towel and some shaving supplies. The man pulled them out, shoving the towel into Fai's trembling arms.

"Dry up," he ordered and Fai quickly used it to dry his body. His boxers dripped chilled waters down his legs, and he wondered if he'd have been better off 'showering' without those. All too soon, the guard had snatched the towel from his hands, handing him a small mirror and a shaving razor. Without shaving cream to help soften few weeks' worth of facial hair growth, it took Fai quite some while to get rid of it all, though by the time he was done, his skin red and irritated with tiny nicks and scratches. The guards didn't appear bothered by that as they snatched the blade and mirror from his hands before dumping a fresh pair of trousers and vest at him.

Noting that there were no dry boxers, he pulled the pants over his wet ones, making a face at the way they immediately dampened his trousers. The guards unchained him to let him pull on the sleeveless vest and by the time he was done with that, the skin on his face had all but healed. He took in a deep breath before letting out a short burst of magic to expel the airborne compounds
from his blood, working on the Cerellium bands around his wrists and neck as the guards began herding him towards the training room.
Mokona resisted the urge to scratch at its stub of a paw. The bandages irritated it too much to ignore, but Yuui had told Mokona not to scratch at the wound. Yuui had injected Mokona with nanites to scan for infections even though Mokona had told Yuui that its magic would ward off anything that would try to make Mokona sick. "It's just to be safe, Little Friend," Yuui had said in return.

"Don't worry, it's just five more minutes before the probes return with the data I need and we can switch them off," Yuui assured Mokona as he glided about the kitchen. Mokona sat on the marble countertop, watching as the man opened cabinets and grabbed several strange looking bottles.

"It still itches."

"Well, the itch is a sign that the nanites are doing their job." Yuui set all the bottles on the counter and moved away to grab a glass and a spoon.

"What is Yuui making?" Mokona asked, walking over to the nearest bottle to peer inside. It was half-filled with an odd smelling paste that made the dimension hopper sneeze.

"Cocktail," the man replied as he unscrewed the caps and began dumping measured quantities into the glass.

"That doesn't look very appetizing." Mokona frowned, eyeing the sludge dubiously.

"It's not for you." Yuui laughed as he mixed in an oily liquid that caused the cocktail to turn from poison green to violent purple. "Cheers." He called out cheerfully before he threw back the concoction and swallowed it in one gulp. He slammed the empty glass on the counter with enough force to crack it before he let go and backed away, coughing and shaking his head.

"Yuui!" Mokona cried, hurrying to the edge of the counter as it stared at the blond. On any other day, Mokona would have simply bounced over to the man, but as it was, every time Mokona tried jumping from high places, its paw throbbed in agony. Mokona looked around, trying to figure out a way to get over to the blond without jostling its paw.

"It's okay. I'm fine." Yuui wheezed as he grabbed a bottle of water and brought it to his lips with shaky hands. Mokona watched him drink, its heart sinking when it realized there was no way to get down from the counter without help. Its frown deepened when the man gave Mokona a shaky smile as he put the empty bottle away.

"Why did Yuui drink something that made him sick?" Mokona demanded when Yuui busied himself with putting everything away. Mokona watched him closely for signs of his condition worsening, but like Yuui had said, he was looking better already.

"You mean the cocktail?" Yuui asked, glancing at the dimension hopper over his shoulder, sounding more and more like his normal self.

"Why would Yuui drink something that nasty?"

"You said your companions were a ninja, a Magirius and a Magirius Vampirosa, right?" Yuui countered without answering Mokona's question.

"Kurogane is the best ninja from Nihon, and Syaoran and Fai are wizards. But why is Yuui—"

"And this Fai is the one that your ninja friend turned into a vampire," Yuui cut in with a frown.

"He's the one that looks just like me. I'm really stretching the limits of my belief with the whole alternate universes and souls thing, but I can't wrap my mind around one thing. According to what you said, only one soul can exist in a dimension at a single moment. Then how can there be two of me?"

"Did Yuui ever have a twin brother?" Mokona asked, noting how Yuui stiffened for a moment before shrugging and busying himself with the cupboard.

"Why do you ask?"
"Because Fai had a twin that died when Fai was very young. Mokona thinks Yuui is the same as Fai's twin."
"So you're saying your friend is a copy of my dead twin?"
"And Yuui of Fai's." Mokona nodded. "That's why Yuui decided to help Mokona find Mokona's friend, isn't it?"
"Right," Yuui drawled as he picked Mokona up, moving out of the kitchen towards the living room of his apartment. He set Mokona down on the leather couch and flicked on the holo-screen.
Mokona thought he looked a little paler in the flickering light. "I'm going to be a little busy in my room for a few hours, so feel free to watch whatever you want in the meantime. No need to come check on me if you hear any strange sounds."
"Yuui is getting sick because of the cocktail." Mokona couldn't keep the worry out of its voice as it spoke, noting the way sweat had begun to dot Yuui's brow. "Why did Yuui take it if it's making him sick?"
"Because I can't go around asking about Unnaturals," Yuui replied as he straightened up. "The nasty stuff is going to help me look like someone else so that The Company doesn't come after me." He patted Mokona on the head before handing the dimension hopper the remote control for the holo-screen. "Don't worry about me. I've done this before."
Mokona watched Yuui make his way across the cluttered apartment towards his bedroom, unable to disregard the pang of worry it felt at the man's parting words. Five minutes later, Mokona heard a loud crash before muffled screams and groans reached Mokona's sensitive ears. Whimpering, Mokona pressed its tiny body deeper into the cushions as it tried to ignore the sounds coming from the other side of the wooden door.
When the door swung open several hours later, Mokona did not even care about its paw as it bounced across the floor to reach Yuui. Mokona stopped only a foot away to gape at the man that had emerged. With eyes as red as blood and hair as silver as the moon, the lanky man looked nothing like Yuui.
"Hello there, Little Friend," The man grinned as he crouched to pick up the dimension hopper. Mokona noticed that although the accent was still there, Yuui's voice had gained a slight lilt, making the words sound almost musical. "Xerxes Break, at your service."

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Yuui checked over his appearance in the mirror one last time. Dressed in a pair of worn-out jeans and a purple t-shirt that peeked out from underneath a white hoodie, there was nothing memorable about the man that stared back at him. He smirked at the image, satisfied with his appearance. Xerxes Break was as far from Yuui Fluorite in terms of appearance as possible. Crouching low, he pulled out the bottom drawer of the cabinet placed underneath the mirror and began digging inside.
"Mokona wants to go with Yuui too," the creature said as it walked over from where Yuui had left it near the sofa earlier. "They are Mokona's friends, and Mokona wants to help."
Grabbing a string of metallic beads from the back of the drawer, Yuui turned his head to look at the little white Unnatural.
"I'm sorry, Mokona," he said, hearing a stranger's voice issue from his lips, "but do you remember that mean lady who called the bad men when you spoke to her? There are a lot of people like that in this city, and if anyone noticed you there, they'd call The Company and we'd both be in trouble."
"But Mokona will be quiet!" the creature promised, waving its remaining paw animatedly.
"Mokona knows how to not be noticeable. Mokona can help."
"I know you want to help," he replied, slipping the beads around his wrist before sliding the drawer shut. "But I'm afraid I can't bring you with me. Beside, this is just some regular information-gathering work. I'll head out, meet up with some of my contacts and see if they've heard anything about your friends, that sort of thing. You don't have to be there for that."
"But..." Mokona's ears drooped. Shaking his head, Yuui reached out to pat the Unnatural.
"You need to hurry up and get better," Yuui said. "You can't do that if you're tiring yourself out. Don't you want to be able to take your friends out of here as soon as you find them?"
"Can Mokona come with Yuui once Yuui knows where everyone is?"
"I'm afraid that even with my resources, that could take a little bit of time," he said as he stood up. A spike of pain shot through his bones, and he grit his teeth, trying to dismiss the feeling as his imagination. He knew it wasn't phantom pains that he was experiencing but the lingering effects of the nanites he had triggered to alter his appearance a few hours ago. But sometimes, thinking that way helped him withstand the pain enough to function after a change.

To the rest of the world he was merely an antiquities dealer, but for the right sort of person, for the right type of payment, he was the only reliable nanites merchant. He mostly sold the standard medical probes to those who couldn't afford or risk going to The Company-funded medical facilities. But nanites specializing in infection treatment, tissue regeneration or muscle recovery weren't the only things he dealt in. Occasionally he'd also acquire customizable probes for the Liberalists or the range limiters for the Scavengers. The latter was a nasty type of nanobots that had once been used by The Company to keep their merchandise in check, but had since been replaced by the Cerellium shackles and collars.

Selling the range limiters was an offense punishable by death in Cavahall, but many of the things Yuui sold fell under that category.

"Is Yuui okay?" Mokona asked in a tiny voice, trailing after him as Yuui as made his way to the kitchen and dug around the cabinets for pain medication. "I'm fine, Mokona," he said before dry-swallowing a couple of pills. "Yuui is in pain."

"It's nothing I can't handle." He waved his hand dismissively, moving towards the door. "Don't worry about it. Now, I'll be locking the door behind me when I leave. I have a very nasty security system so don't try anything stupid like trying to go out when I'm gone. I'm not going to stop you from leaving if you want to but I'd rather you do it while I'm around to see you off. Besides, I need to protect my home, so don't take it personally. There's food in the ice chest and painkillers on the counter. Help yourself to those whenever you want. If all goes well, I should be back by tomorrow afternoon."

"Mokona will be here," the Unnatural promised. "I'll see you tomorrow then." He grinned as he stepped out of the apartment, pausing only long enough to activate the security system. Pulling the hood of his jacket over his head, he made his way out of the building, whistling a cheery little tune as he went. He paused on the steps for a moment as pain spiked through his leg, but he could feel the medicine kicking in already. Waiting only long enough to cast a glance around the deserted street of Sector-53, he stepped outside. Nearly the entire population of Sector-53 had been wiped out in a secret raid a couple of years ago. Crooks and criminals and survivors from other sectors had moved in to claim the abandoned houses once the quarantine had been lifted, since 53 was one of the only semi-high end sectors ever to have been raided. Yuui had claimed multiple buildings as his own all over Cavahall, but the one in Sector 53 was still one of his favorites. He walked down several blocks before turning around a corner and stepping inside a dimly lit club. Loud music and raucous laughter spilled outside and the powerful beats thrummed inside his chest as soon as he stepped inside the door. Pushing his hood off, he stopped to greet the man guarding the door.

"Long time no see, Break," the man yelled as he eyed Yuui. "Oh you know how business can be at times, Po."

"Business bring you here today or have you decided to unwind again?" Po laughed suggestively. "Quit being so popular with the girls, man. It makes the rest of us look bad."

Yuui laughed, shaking his head as he did so. "You know I can't help it if they fall for my charms, mate."

"It's good to see you again, man." Po chuckled, waving him further inside the club. Light pulsed in sync with the loud music as Yuui made his way across the dance floor, pushing past the throng of writhing bodies. The stench of smoke and alcohol was heavy in the air, but it didn't bother him at all. Stopping at the edge of the dance floor for just a moment, he scanned the tables and the bar for a familiar face.

"Took your time to come back, didn't you Xerxes?" a woman murmured in his ear as she appeared
to his right, her gloved hand playing with the hair at the nape of his neck. "You don't seem to mind the wait, Solaris." He turned, giving the lavender-eyed woman a sharp smile. "Would you like a drink?"

"Only if you're buying," she replied, sauntering off towards the bar. Yuui watched the way her hips swayed as she walked away. She paused halfway to give him a coy look, expecting him to follow. Casting one last glance around for the person he had been looking for, Yuui joined her with little smirk.

"So what brought you to the Cat's Eye Club tonight?" she asked, peering at him through her bangs after Yuui had finished ordering their drinks.

"Oh you know, little bit of this, little bit of that."

"Business, in other words." Solaris sighed as she shook her head and looked away. "And here I thought you finally came to seek some good company."

"Rumors actually," he corrected, picking up the glass of alcohol as the bartender slid it over to him. "Of course, having your company is a rather lovely benefit."

"You certainly have a way with words, Break." Solaris chuckled as she took a dainty sip of her glass. "Too bad I find it hard to believe you. Might have worked if I wasn't so used to seeing you in the arms of a different woman every time. So, what's this about the rumors?"

"Word has been going around about The Company's latest… acquisitions."

"Sector-64 B you mean? Akira was running low on lab rats. The bitch manipulated the head of security to authorize another raid and then had marketing pin the blame on those foolish Liberals."

"I'm surprised you'd think their efforts foolish, considering your unique," he paused briefly, raking eyes over her slightly tense form before smirking, "assets."

"You'd know all about those assets, wouldn't you, Xerxes?" Solaris smirked back when she noticed where his gaze had landed. Yuui chuckled, looking back at her face.

"I'm guessing those acquisitions weren't the ones you wanted to know about, though," she added after a while.

"Afraid not, love." Yuui shook his head. "I'm more interested in a certain pair of Unnaturals that might have been acquired a week before the raid, give or take a few days."

"The Company captures one or two Unnaturals every other day, what makes this pair so special?"

"Never mind I asked." Yuui sighed as he stood up. "Keep an ear out in case you hear something."

"Why don't you drop by later to remind me?" Solaris suggested. "Maybe I'll even let you get reacquainted with my assets."

"I'm looking forward to the visit already."

Bidding farewell to Po at the exit, Yuui made his way across the sector, easily slipping past the check-post to enter the adjacent sector. Holographic displays and adverts lit up the streets where he walked. Yuui pulled the hood back up to cover his face as he crossed the entire sector and the one after that. Despite the lateness of the hour, crowds of people milled about in both sectors, life and business carrying on as norm. Only once he was safely across the check-post to the third connected sector did Yuui reveal his face.

The holographic displays here were a lot less extravagant, with mediocre image quality, though the people didn't seem to mind. The buildings here appeared more worn out as well, the entire place carrying an aura of neglect. The crowd was thinner here, allowing Yuui to move quickly as he headed towards Clover, one of the most frequented bars of the sector. Sector-56 lay in the shadow of The Company, so many of the low-ranking workers occupied the buildings here. And on weekend nights like that one, Clover was the best place for them to relax.

"Well, well, well, look who wandered to the wrong sector," said a blond woman as she marched up to Yuui a second after he had stepped through the double doors. "If it isn't Xerxes Break."

"Hello to you as well, Olivia."

"Why are you here, Break?" Olivia growled, pushing him into the wall as she pressed a dagger to his throat.

"What, this?" He laughed. Unfazed by the sudden show of hostility, he adopted an innocent
expression. "Am I supposed to be banned from the premises now?"
"I won't ask again, Break. Why have you come back?"
"Oh come now, love. Don't tell me you're still upset about what happened between us."
"Please." Olivia snorted. "It'll take more than a pretty-faced playboy to upset me."
"Aww, you are upset."
Olivia said nothing as she glared at him, her lips pulled down at the corners as she pressed the dagger closer to his jugular.
"Okay, okay, I won't joke about what happened." He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "If I tell you why I'm here, will you remove the dagger from my throat? I'd hate it if I have to fight you, love."
"I'm not your love." She spat.
"Oh yeah, you're definitely upset." He grinned, not even flinching when she broke the skin to draw blood. "I'm here to see Candy. Is she in tonight?"
"Her shift ends in fifteen minutes."
"I see. Well then, can I buy you a drink, love? I've got some time to kill."
Olivia glowered at him before she turned around with a huff and stomped away. Chuckling to himself, Yuui followed after the blond as he headed over to the bar. Grabbing a vacant stool, he ordered himself a drink, scanning the room for Candy. The girl was rather tall for her age, making it easy for Yuui to spot her near the back. The auburn-haired twenty-two year old was conversing with a group employed by The Company. She laughed at a joke one of the men cracked before growing serious when she sighted Yuui at the bar.
The girl politely excused herself from the group before heading over to him.
"Xerxes, hi!" she greeted him cheerfully as she set down the serving tray on the counter. "What are you doing here?"
"The third time in the past hour that someone has asked me that question," he sighed dramatically. "Is it so hard to believe that I've come for a drink?"
"You never come for just a drink." She giggled.
"It seems that I'm getting predictable." He chuckled.
"Maybe if you came out for a drink every now and then, you could lose that."
"I did order a drink, love." As if on cue, the bartender slid a glass full of amber liquid that Yuui picked up as proof. "But I'll keep that in mind for next time. Join me once you get off your shift."
"And that alone tells me that you're here on a job."
"More like reconnaissance."
"Oh?" she perked up, slipping on to the empty stool next to him. "What sort?"
"It's nothing big." He shrugged, taking a gulp of his drink. "I'm just checking out the validity of some rumors."
"Quit being so secretive, Xerxes." Candy pouted as she leaned against the marble counter. "What is it?"
"Word is, the raid in Sector-64 was a cover up for a field test," he replied, glancing at the girl out of the corner of his eye.
"Oh yeah." She nodded. "Jericho was just telling me about that. Two Unnaturals broke into The Company a couple of weeks ago. And by break in, I mean appeared right out of thin air. The idiots at The Company are completely clueless, but they must have had help from a teleporting Elemental I guess. Can you believe that? Why would any Unnatural want to break into that place?"
"Maybe they were trying to rescue someone..." Yuui shrugged, grinning internally. He seemed to have hit the jackpot. A few rounds of alcohol always loosened tongues. Then there was the fact that Candy had a lot of admirers, even if the girl didn't realize it herself. Her customers were usually the most talkative of the bunch, providing Yuui with a source that always gathered the most interesting bits of information.
"Pretty stupid of them, if you ask me." She frowned, her expression darkening momentarily. "It's impossible to break out of that place for Unnaturals. They should have just stayed away like everyone else."
"Did Jericho mention what species they were?" he prodded.
"Well, one was a Magirius and the other was a hybrid, a Magirius Vampirosa. The guys at R & D turned them into drones, after they had the hybrid turn his apprentice. The raid was just to see how well they functioned in the field."

"They have been trying to weaponize Unnaturals for quite a few years now." Yuui nodded, sipping his drink as he compared her information to what he had already gathered. He was almost certain the captured Unnaturals were the companions Mokona had mentioned. The little Unnatural had mentioned that it sometimes lost its companions during dimension jumps. Their arrival at Cavahall had been one such instance. But if they had been claimed as The Company's property, there wasn't anything that could be done for them. Like Candy had said, it was impossible to escape, so it would be of little use to tell Mokona about their whereabouts. Not that Yuui had intended to tell the creature anytime soon anyways.

The only reason he had come out that night was because he was curious. Somewhere out there was a copy of his brother's soul. He wasn't the same as his brother because his brother had been dead for years. But Yuui had been interested in the type of person this copy had grown up to be.

"Did the field test yield any promising results?" he inquired. If the implants had done their intended job, Mokona's companions had probably ceased to exist altogether. He wondered what had become of the third companion.

"Nah, the elder one rejected the implant and the younger one..." she trailed off, picking at a loose thread in torn jeans. Yuui could see the sliver of a cybernetic leg peak out from a rip on the right one. "What about him?"

"K.I.A." She sighed. "The younger one couldn't cope with the transition and went crazy or something. There haven't been any sightings, so they're assuming he got killed during the raid. And seeing as he was part vampire, there's no way to confirm, considering..."

"Considering his body would have turned to ash the minute he was killed." Yuui nodded. "So what are they doing with the older one now that he's failed as a drone?"

"What they do with all the good-looking ones." She shrugged as Yuui ordered himself another drink. "I suspect they'll be having him entertain customers soon."

"Pleasure Program?" Yuui quirked a brow. "I'd have thought they'd put him on the market. A hybrid would have fetched quite a handsome price."

"I don't think they'd sell the only hybrid they've captured in years."

"True." He pushed away from the counter as he stood up. Digging around in his pockets, he grabbed his card and swiped it against the scanner to pay for his drinks.

"Leaving so soon?" Candy asked, looking a little disappointed.

"I've got a date with Solaris, love." He winked, pulling out a brown package from his other pocket. He threw it at Candy who caught it before cautiously unwrapping the paper. "I came to see you first because I thought you'd want some—"

"Candy!" she squealed in delight. "And you even got me chocolates. Oh Xerxes, you're the best!"

"I had a shipment brought in a couple of days ago." He chuckled as he watched the girl tear into the treats with a childish enthusiasm. "Enjoy." He waved over his shoulder as he headed back into the streets.

He still had to find where the ninja was now that he knew that the younger companion was dead and the older one was well on his way to becoming an entertainer. Glancing up at the holographic clock hovering high up in the sky, he noticed that it was nearly two in the morning. Massaging a crick in his neck, Yuui sighed as he tried to decide on what to do.

It was late and he was tired. The painful physical transformation from Yuui to Xerxes earlier that day hadn't helped much either. In all his time dealing with smuggled nanites, there had only ever been one set that he never put on the black-market for sale, even though it could have brought him a fortune. The nanites' unique ability to alter the human body's appearance at the most basic, cellular level was something only an idiot would give away. And even though Yuui was many things, an idiot was not one of them.
The nanites had been a single batch stolen from a research facility in its early stages of development, though the facility had been mysteriously destroyed soon after. So Yuui was in possession of the only sample in existence, which he had chosen to use on himself. The process, as it stood, was excruciating as hell, getting worse with each progressive use. But for a man like Yuui, the advantage of not being tracked by The Company far outweighed the pain he went through during each change. Of course he always had to wait a day or two before switching from one version to the other, and the nanites only had three appearances with the default setting being set to his original appearance. But the lack of choices didn’t bother him much. Glancing around at the somewhat-deserted streets, Yuui decided to take Solaris up on her offer for the night. He could meet with the rest of his contacts the next day since Mokona would not be expecting him back until tomorrow evening. Pulling up the hood to cover his face, Yuui started walking towards Solaris’s sector.

Chapter End Notes

The original character Candy belongs to angelcat2865, Xerxes Break belongs to Jun Mochizuki, Solaris and Olivia belong to Hiromu Arakawa and that’s pretty much it for the characters I’ve borrowed for the purpose of this chapter. Don’t forget to review. I hope you guys enjoy the update.
Haywire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fai followed the guards through the maze of corridors towards a section of the building he hadn't been to before. The employees wandering the halls ignored him for the most part, though he did catch a few whispers about him as they passed. Fai didn't let that bother him, though; he focused instead on memorizing the turns they took, creating a mental map of the floor as he marked the path he would have to take to reach the elevators...once he had managed to get rid of the shackles and the collar, of course. Breathing deeply, he expelled the compound from his blood, slowly eroding the insides of the Cerellium bands even as the stark white hallways transformed into a series of corridors designed to appear more welcoming. The doors shifted from plain slabs of metal to polished cherry wood, with expensive potted plants placed at regular intervals between the successive doors.

Even without meaning too, Fai could occasionally pick up on the sounds of soft moans or sighs behind some of the doors, though sometimes he'd hear muffled screams, too. He didn't have to think very hard on the probable cause of those sounds, though he had to wonder about the exact number of slaves undergoing the training he was due to receive.

Naba waited for them halfway down one such hallway, standing next to a dark, polished door with her hands folded behind her back. Fai made sure to keep his head lowered, not wanting to arouse her suspicion as they came to stop in front of her. Naba moved to his side before clamping her cold fingers around his arm. Without a word, she turned her back towards the guards, forcing Fai to turn with her as she started towards the door. Fai was almost getting used to being led around by her in this manner, though he didn't like it any more now than he did before. Hopefully in a couple of days' time, he wouldn't have to worry about being treated like a subhuman.

He paid attention to the numeric code that Naba entered in the keypad next to the door, even if he wouldn't be able to unlock it himself by virtue of being an Unnatural. But he had made it a habit to make note of every little detail that he could about the people holding him captive.

Naba nudged him over the threshold as she let go of his arm. She still didn't say anything, but Fai already knew what she expected of him. Swallowing his pride, Fai moved to the center of the room and got down on his knees, his arms pressed by his sides as he waited for his mistress to come inside.

"You see, 224? You're finally learning your place in our world," Naba crooned, clapping her hands in delight as she approached him.

The guards entered the room after her, taking positions on either side of the door, their postures alert. Fai still kept his gaze trained on the carpeted floor, but he'd gotten rather good at judging someone's stance just by looking at their feet. He could tell without even looking at her face to know that Naba was thrilled at having succeeded in training him in such a short amount of time. He took comfort in the fact that she hadn't yet thought to look closer at why he might be so cooperative. He was perfectly content with letting her think she had broken his spirit.

"Now that you are finally accepting your role," Naba said as she scratched the top of his lowered head, "how about you get used to putting on that gorgeous tattoo on display?"

The guard on the right shifted his feet impatiently. It wasn't hard for Fai to guess that the man
would rather be someplace else than standing watch over someone like Naba and her little pet. The guard on the left, however… he almost seemed excited by what was to come next.

"Take off your shirt, 224," Naba ordered, her tone shifting to annoyance when Fai didn't immediately comply.

"Yes, Mistress," he whispered. He didn't really care about what she might have planned for this session. Well, no, that wasn't true. He did care, but he'd resigned himself to the fact that he might not come unscathed out of the whole ordeal. But he knew he had to go along with whatever she asked of him until he could break free of the Cerellium bands. Grabbing the hem of his grey shirt, Fai pulled it off.

"Sam really outdid himself," Naba's fingers moved to the base of his neck, tracing over the pattern that had been inked into his skin less than twenty-four hours ago. "This is perfect for you."

"When do you want us to bring in the retard?" asked the guard on the right, sounding irritated. "We left it in the other room half an hour ago. I don't think it's meant to be left unsupervised."

"I'm certain 147 won't get into anything while you're not there to watch over it." Naba's tone turned cold, and Fai pictured her glaring at the guard in his mind's eye. "But if you're so worried about it, go keep watch over it until I call for you."

The guard grumbled some choice names for her as he turned to leave. Fai bit his cheek to keep from smiling at some of the things he said, though Naba must not have heard him as she turned her attention to the remaining guard.

"You as well, John," she said and the man turned to leave, his posture clearly projecting his disappointment at getting kicked out. She waited until the door was firmly closed before speaking. "You're lucky to have me as your trainer, 224. With anyone else, you would still be undergoing behavioral training at this stage. But you're a fast learner, aren't you, 224?"

"Yes, Mistress," he mumbled, not even having to think about what he had to say anymore. He could feel her hungry gaze wash over him but he was certain it wasn't because she could sense him using his magic to erode the Cerellium. The guards hadn't been able to sense anything while they had been leading him to this room, so he was willing to bet Naba wouldn't either. These people didn't believe the Unnaturals capable of resisting the effects of the compounds being pumped into the air.

"It is a great privilege to be chosen for the Pleasure Program," Naba continued as she turned her back towards him. "You will even be assigned your own room. That has to be a nice change from your little cage."

"Yes, Mistress," he replied obediently, even though he had to resist the urge to scoff. He'd choose the cage over a room if the latter involved having to whore himself out to whomever The Company deemed fit.

"You're turning out to be such a good pet," Naba patted his head but Fai only gave her half his attention. If he had to put up with her demeaning behavior for the rest of the day, he might as well concentrate on the more important task. "I'm so proud of you, 224. Very good."

Fai held his tongue, wondering if her plan for the day involved wearing him out by not shutting up.

"We receive all types of customers in the Pleasure Program," Naba told him, her words sounding monotonous and well-rehearsed, possibly from having repeated them while training other
unfortunate Unnaturals. "Some merely seek the pleasure of the company our entertainers have to offer, while others wish to hire out our merchandise for formal occasions. But there are others who merely pay us money to have a good time. Since you are now on the fast track to becoming an entertainer, you will need to know how to fulfill your duty to all of our customers in whatever capacity that they require of you. I have scheduled for some of our experienced entertainers to guide you through the less demanding duties of your position as an entertainer in the coming week. However, today," she paused, letting her words hang in the air for a while as her fingers moved over his exposed back, "you are going to demonstrate the level of your physical abilities."

Naba walked around him to crouch in front of him. She pressed her pointed nails beneath his chin, using them to lift his head until it was level with her face. Amusement glimmered in Naba's eyes as he stared at her for a brief moment before remembering that he wasn't supposed to look her in the eye. He lowered his gaze, staring at her chin as she held his face in place.

"I want to see exactly what you are capable of," Naba finished as she let go of him and stepped away. She pulled out a small device from her jacket, and for a moment Fai thought it was the remote to his collar, and he tensed in anticipation of the pain that was coming. She pressed the button but nothing happened and she chuckled at Fai's relieved expression. "John, bring in 147."

Fai wondered why she had suddenly decided to use another Unnatural to train him when she had shown her eagerness at wanting to train him herself only the previous day. He wondered if her higher ups had somehow found out about her breaking protocol after all. If that were the case, perhaps she wouldn't be allowed to bring in Sam later on. Fai sneaked a glance up at Naba to confirm that she wasn't paying attention to him before having a look around the room, or as much of a look as he could take without moving his head.

There were two cameras installed in the corners where the walls met the ceiling. A ceiling-to-floor window stretched out to his right, letting him catch a glimpse of the dreary city outside. There were no doors in the room, apart from the one she had led him though earlier, and Fai marked that as a possible exit in his mental map of the floor. If things got desperate enough, there was also a chance that he could escape through the window, but he hoped things wouldn't get that desperate. Levitation spells cost a lot of magical energy, and in his state, it wouldn't be possible to maintain that spell for longer than a few seconds. The level of his magical reserves was pathetically low due to constantly having to expend energy to keep the compounds out of his blood and the concentrated channeling he was performing to erode the Cerellium.

By the time the guards arrived, Fai's knees had begun to hurt, despite the plush carpet that covered the floor he knelt on. Judging from the sound of the footsteps that followed the guards, the Unnatural they had brought with them was rather timid, which wasn't surprising at all, considering the type of conditioning these handlers preferred. The only reason Fai hadn't succumbed to all the things Naba made him repeat everyday was because he didn't allow himself to lose sight of the promise he had made. His vow to avenge Syaoran was all that had kept him from going insane.

"Akira has generously agreed to lend us one of her subjects from the Breeding Program," she said, though her tone indicated that she thought Akira was anything but generous. "She wishes to harvest some of your genetic material for a new set of experiments, and the directors have agreed to allow 147 to collect that from you today. Since they didn't specify how they wanted it done, I've decided that this will be your very first training exercise. Stand up, 224."

Fai stood up, feeling pins and needles stab all over his legs as the blood rushed to his cramped muscles. The thought of allowing anyone of them to procure his 'genetic material' made Fai sick to his stomach. He had never given much thought to having kids of his own, having never found the right person, but he was fairly certain that this was not what he'd pictured.
"Your partner for this session, 147, happens to be a result of one of Akira's earliest experiments," Naba informed him as the guards led the slave over. Fai could tell from the way she trembled that 147 was terrified of him. "I suppose with a little bit of work, it could be made to look attractive. Too bad the same can't be said for its intelligence."

Fai raised his head to see Naba examining the female Unnatural, but his breath caught in his throat when he saw who it was. 147's hair was cut so short that it barely reached her chin, but it wasn't hard for Fai to recognize the delicate features as Chii's. His heartbeat sped up and he lost control over the magic he had been channeling. The airborne compounds that he had been expelling up until then diffused back into his bloodstream, but Fai had more pressing issues to deal with. Naba expected him to demonstrate his 'skills' on Chii? Even if she was Cavahall's version of the construct Fai had created, she had based her appearance on his mother. His mother! Doing anything with her would be just as bad as—

"You look intimidated, 224," Naba said as she turned her attention to him, though she did not reprimand him for looking up without permission. Fai didn't think he would have cared much even if she had chosen to punish him. "I was a little skeptical when Akira presented the defective specimen, but she has assured me that 147 is perfectly docile. 147 and its clones were created to study the effects of mental development on Unnatural abilities. The one standing here had its brain development stopped at an early age. It won't give you any trouble."

"H-How young?" he asked, praying that his voice didn't sound as shaky as he thought it did.

"Somewhere around thirteen or fourteen," Naba replied, once again ignoring the fact that he had spoke without being spoken to. "I wasn't paying attention. Now listen carefully, 224, I'm only going to give you half an hour with 147 for the demonstration. Make sure she has what she was brought here for by then. I will be assessing your abilities, so you better not waste my time. I want to know exactly what I've got to work with here."

"Go wild, 224," Naba smirked as she ruffled his hair for a moment before sauntering out of the room. The guards left right behind her and Fai heard the door beep twice as it locked them inside. An eternity seemed to pass as he tried to figure out some way to escape the situation. He didn't have the time to implement his original plan. He had thought he'd have had another couple of days before attempting a breakout, certain of his ability to endure whatever Naba chose to put him through. But this… No, he wouldn't allow himself to go through something like this. Maybe if he could get rid of the collar quick enough, he could use his vampire strength to rip the shackles from his wrists before Naba could—

The collar came alive with electricity and Fai fell to the floor with a strangled cry as all thoughts of an escape plan fled from his mind. When Naba stopped electrocuting him, Fai shakily pushed himself into a sitting position, noting with some surprise that 147 had moved across the room to stand with her back pressed against the window. His own pale face stared back at him through the glass though he could still see the skyline if he focused past the reflections.

"I told you not to waste my time, 244." Naba's displeased voice issued from a black box next to one of the cameras on the wall. "Get on with it and show me what you can do."
I need more time, he thought as he clambered to his feet. He looked up towards the cameras before glancing back outside. A plan finally began to formulate in his mind as he slowly approached Chii.

"Please, don't hurt me," Chii whimpered, shrinking away in fear.

It broke his heart to see her that way, but Fai couldn't blame her for feeling afraid.

"Sssh, it's okay," he whispered, holding up his hands in a placating manner as he came to stand in front of her.

"No, please…" 147 shook her head as she edged towards the right. Fai peeked at the cameras once again, pretending to lick his lips in a show of nervousness as he took another step towards the girl. He didn't really have the time to review his hastily-put-together plan, but he could only pray that he hadn't miscalculated. He had to give Naba the illusion of a compliant slave until he had everything in place. He couldn't risk them figuring out what he was doing before he had a chance to put it in action.

Fai returned his attention to 147, closing the distance between them before the girl could so much as squeak as he wrapped his arms around her waist. He dropped a chaste kiss in her hair before pulling her close, lowering his head next to her ear.

"My name is Fai D. Flourite and I am the High Mage of the Royal Celesian Court," he breathed, hoping he could get 147 to comply. He didn't want her to get shocked. "I swear I'm not going to do anything to hurt you. Do you have a name?"

"I'm… 147," she replied in a tiny voice, her petite body stiff in his arms though he could feel the tremors that wracked her frame.

"I knew someone who looked just like you, you know," he told her. Fai could feel the ridges of her spine through the thin material of the dress she wore. He brought up a hand to carefully brush his fingers through her short hair. "Her name was Chii. Do you like that name?"

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Nothing, I promise. I'm not going to do anything to you," he said in earnest, wishing that there was a way that he could convince her without giving himself away. He took in a deep breath before using a sharp burst of magic to expel the compound from his blood as he exhaled. Instead of focusing a concentrated stream of magic on the skin of his wrists, he redirected everything towards eroding the collar. His sensitive hearing picked the sound of a faint sizzle as his magic reacted with the metal, carving the lines deeper and deeper into the Cerellium.

Just a little bit more, he thought, pulling away from Chii to look at her when he realized that it was much quicker to cut through one band than trying to erode all three at once.

"I have a plan, but I'm going to need your help with it, Chii."

"I'm not Chii," she told him in a small voice.

"I know." He nodded. The name had slipped past his lips before he had been able to stop himself. "I know you're not, but you're not just a number either."

"But I have always been 147," she said, looking confused.

"You don't have to be if you don't want to." He shook his head. "But I thought you might like having a proper name."
"I'm just 147," she insisted, looking as though she was about to cry and Fai decided to let the issue go.

"I'm not seeing any action, 244," Naba's impatient voice crackled through the speaker before he could reply, though 147 quickly moved away, looking afraid.

"It's okay, I promised not to hurt you, remember?" he stopped whispering as he held up his hands, cautiously approaching her. "Can I ask you to trust me?"

"Trust you?" It was with some surprise that Fai realized the girl was confused more by the meaning of the word than what he had asked of her.

"Believe me when I say that I won't harm you," he explained in a gentle manner even as he kept a steady stream of his magic over his neck to cut through the metal.

"I don't see how she can trust you when it won't be true for much longer." Naba sounded amused by what he had just said, though he felt a little relieved at the realization that she hadn't heard his whispered conversation with 147. The Unnatural whimpered as she pressed her body into the wall behind her, but Fai's attention was drawn by the almost imperceptible click as he broke all the way through the collar.

"I'm not a rapist," he snarled, turning his head to look directly at the camera as he reached up and broke off the collar, "and there is no way I'd let someone like you turn me into one."

He was certain Naba's expression would be twisting in anger at that statement, and he allowed himself a moment to smirk at the woman before he hooked his fingers under the Cerellium manacle on his left wrist. The broken pieces of the collar faintly buzzed on the ground near Fai's feet, but he paid it no mind as he managed to twist the metal off his arm. Guards yelled in the corridor outside and he realized he didn't have the time to get the other band off. But it didn't matter; he was more than capable of casting spells with just one hand. Whirling on his feet, Fai cast a simple blasting spell at the floor to ceiling window.

Chii squeaked in surprise when his magic caused the glass to explode outwards, away from them. He could picture the broken shards raining down on the pavement far below. He glanced towards the door when he heard the guards entering the passcode on the other side. Knowing that he had run out of time, he hurried to the very edge of the room, pausing only long enough to catch a glimpse of the wet pavement below. The door slammed into the wall as the guards threw it open. Without any warning, they unleashed a hail of bullets and Chii shrieked as she threw herself at Fai. Her tiny body slammed into his a second before one of the bullets tore into his left forearm. The combined effect made him lose his balance and he tumbled out of the broken window, accidentally dragging Chii down with him as he went.

The pain from the bullet wound barely registered in his mind as he twisted in midair. He pulled the screaming unnatural to his side, though her cries were drowned out by the wind howling in his ears. The air whipped his hair around his face and despite the ground drawing closer with every heartbeat, Fai felt a rush of exhilaration. The adrenalin pumping through his veins leant him the strength he needed to call on his magic as he curled his lips and began to whistle. Using the sound waves, he wove a complex but flexible web of magic around them that would slow their descent. The guards opened fired as soon as Fai's spell swirled into existence, piercing through his shield though, thankfully, none of the bullets hit him again.

He was injured and it was hard enough to maintain his control over such a taxing spell. He didn't think he'd be able to safely get them to the ground if he was hit for a second time. Already, the Cerellium around his left wrist was hindering his ability to control the spell by inhibiting him from
accessing his full magic. Fai tried to direct his spell so that it would take them all the way across the building's perimeter, but halfway there, Fai felt a tendril of familiar magic brush against his mind for a brief moment. The suddenness of the contact made Fai lose control over his spell and they dove towards the ground. Fai tightened his grip around Chii, protecting her with his body as they hit the earth.

His teeth painfully knocked together at the impact and he tasted blood in his mouth, but everything somehow got pushed to the back of his racing mind as he tried to make sense of what he had felt. The magic he had felt had belonged to Mokona, but it didn't make sense for the dimension hopper to still be in Cavahall. He groaned when Chii, who had clambered off of him at some point, grabbed his injured arm and began to tug.

"Get up," she insisted without letting up on her pulling.

Fai sat up, feeling something warm slide down the back of his neck. His head throbbed in sync with each heartbeat but he could already feel the wound closing up as he struggled to stand. The world tilted on its axis but Chii managed to keep him upright. Fighting off the feeling of vertigo, Fai looked around. The interconnected black and white towers of The Company headquarters loomed threateningly behind them, though Fai's attention was drawn by the guards rushing towards them from all directions.

Chii whimpered, pressing against his side as her tiny fingers dug into the flesh of his injured arm and Fai bit back a pained hiss. He frowned at the bullet wound, wondering why his body hadn't expelled it, unsure whether to feel relieved that his injury hadn't closed with it still inside or worried that that particular wound wasn't healing at all. The guards were starting to close their circle around them, their guns drawn and positioned towards him and Chii. Fai was a little surprised to note that none of them shot even when they got within range.

_They must have orders to bring us back alive_, Fai thought grimly as he judged the distance between himself and the part of the circle where the guards were furthest. _I'm sure I can make it through there and then out of the compound if I'm fast enough but... what do I do about Chii? Maybe I can just leave—_

"224, 147, we have you surrounded," said the leader of the guards. "Lay down on the ground and put your hands behind your heads."

"I'm scared," Chii whispered in a tiny voice and Fai immediately felt guilty about entertaining the thought of leaving her behind. He had asked her to trust him. Could he really leave her behind and let her down?

**But I have to get back to the others.**

Even if it didn't make sense for Mokona to be in Cavahall, he was certain the magic had belonged to the dimension hopper. And if Mokona was there, that meant Kurogane was still in Cavahall as well. Fai couldn't understand why Kurogane would have chosen to stay behind, but the knowledge alone that his friends were still there changed everything. Maybe Kurogane had chosen to stay because he didn't know that Syaoran was dead, or maybe he thought Mokona was mistaken about his death or maybe he believed that Fai was still alive. Or maybe they had come back.

He glanced down at Chii, who was shivering in fright. She reminded him so much of his mother and also of the construct he'd fashioned after her. The one that had stayed with brother up until the very end. This wasn't her and he didn't owe her anything at all, but even so, Fai knew that he wouldn't be able to abandon her. He could feel the bullet burning inside his flesh, reacting with the lingering magic in his blood, and he concluded that it must have been made out of Cerellium. It
made sense for the guards to use the metal to subdue Unnaturals, after all.

He grit his teeth, mentally preparing himself for the burn to intensify as he called on his magic to cast a transportation spell.

"Get down on the ground!" the guards ordered once more but Fai ignored them, his heartbeat speeding up in trepidation as he realized that he didn't have enough magic to transport them both.

One of the men fired a warning shot and Chii dug her fingers into his arm hard enough to draw blood.

"Chii, listen to me," he whispered, slowly pulling her towards the ground with him though he kept an eye on the men surrounding them, "I'm going to send you to a friend, alright? His name is Kurogane. Tell him I sent you and he'll keep you safe. Tell him that I'm sorry about— no, never mind. I'll tell him myself."

Getting ready to dart through the gap between the guards as soon as he was done, Fai channeled his magic into the tips of his fingers. It was a testament to his skill as a magician that he managed to locate and anchor his spell to Kurogane's location with only a fraction of his magic at his disposal. His hand flashed through the air as he wove a set of runes through the air around them. The spell was cast before the guards could react and Chii was dissolving from his arm in a tendril of blue-tinged smoke.

The guards cried in alarm, some of them shooting at the spot where Fai had been crouching at but he was already moving, racing across the grass. He dashed through the opening in the guards' flanks, intent on meeting up with Kurogane and Mokona. Despite the amount of security inside the building on the two floors that Fai had been limited to, the perimeter of The Company was marked by nothing more than a row of neatly trimmed hedges at the end of the grassy lawn. But more guards arrived to intercept his path, the ones behind him having held off their fire once again.

_They're not allowed to kill me_, Fai thought as he jabbed his palm into one of the guard's throats when the man tried to stop him. His victim dropped like a stone but Fai didn't stop to see him fall. He merely flipped over the second guard that came at him. They were all armed, but none of them fired at him again, so Fai merely dodged and ducked and moved around the men that came in his way.

Ten feet.

Fai slipped on a wet patch of land, but he regained his balance, using the motion to slide through the parted legs of one guard before rolling back onto his feet as he drew closer and closer to the perimeter.

Six feet.

Fai didn't fool himself into believing that he would be safe the minute he was across that marker, but he knew he would be one step closer to his freedom on the other side.

Three feet.

A bullet scraped his arm and he hissed in irritation as the skin knit itself back together.

_Must be getting desperate._ Fai swerved to the right before ducking back to the left, hoping to confuse the shooter about which way he was running.

One foot.
Something small and sharp punched through his back, the force and shock of the impact carrying him over the hedge as he leapt into the air. He missed his landing, falling in a graceless heap of sprawled limbs on the cold asphalt. A burning poison spread through his blood even as part of it leaked from the wound in his back, trailing down his sides in crimson rivulets. He felt the warmth of his own blood pooling beneath his body. He tried to get up, but his limbs refused to obey, the chill from the ground he lay on seeping into his flesh. He could hear the sound of approaching footsteps, but the noise was drowned out by the sound of his own breath, which was rapid and shallow and far, far too loud in his ears. He struggled and failed to move, his vision darkening around the edges as someone came to stand over him, kicking Fai onto his back with a boot, obviously not caring about the injury he had. An injury that wasn't healing.

"And that, gentlemen, is how you take down a rogue Unnatural," a cold, silky voice said from somewhere far away as the darkness claimed him and he knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

He almost escaped. Poor guy. I'm the worst, aren't I? xD Don't worry though. There will be other opportunities for him in the future. Far, far in the future.
A bloody moon hung low in the sky, casting eerie shadows across the red-tinted desert. Kurogane's gut twisted into painful knots as he looked up at the crumbling wing-shaped ruins that covered the sacred reservoir of Clow. Scanning his surroundings through narrowed eyes, he noticed that there was no one else around.

He didn't understand how the ruins could have been neglected to such an extent in the short amount of time since he'd been here last. A cold wind blew swirls of sand around Kurogane, uncovering a cracked skull half-buried in the ground. The bone contrasted sharply with the crimson sand around it, giving it the illusion of being submerged in blood. A rust-covered staff jutted out of the ground a few feet away from the skull. Carefully surveying his surroundings for hidden threats, Kurogane brought up his hands to summon Ginryuu, realizing only a moment later that not only could he not sense his sword, but he seemed to be missing his mechanical arm as well.

"Kurogane-san, help!" Syaoran's panicked voice rang from inside the ruins and Kurogane nearly felt his heart stop. The kid was in trouble. Grabbing the staff that he had spotted earlier Kurogane raced into the ruins. "Kurogane-san!" The kid's voice echoed all around him.

Sconces set into the walls on either side of the long corridor came alive as soon as he had crossed over the threshold, and the fire glowed a menacing crimson, flickering as he raced past it. The hallways seemed to go on forever, and all the while, Syaoran's cries for help grew more and more desperate.

"Hang on, kid! I'm coming!" Kurogane yelled, willing his legs to move faster, but no matter how fast he ran or how much he pushed his body, he never found the kid. A point came when all Kurogane heard was a long, piercing shriek embodying raw terror, and then...nothing. Kurogane stumbled to a halt, straining against the blood pounding inside his head as he tried to listen. "Kid?" he ventured, closing his eyes to try and locate Syaoran's aura in his mind's eye.

Why the hell didn't I think of this before? He thought angrily as he searched for a light in the darkness that surrounded him.

Nothing.

"Oi, kid. Where are you?"

Silence pressed against his eardrums, yet he could hear nothing beyond the sound of his own rapid breath. An eternity passed as he stood there in the corridor, eyes closed, senses spread out as far as they could go while he tried to search for the kid. And then he felt it, at the very edge of his perception, a flicker of something that felt familiar. But it was faint. Almost like it was going out.

Kid! Kurogane's eyes snapped open ad he whirled to his right to face the wall.

The staff clattered to the floor as Kurogane adjusted his stance and threw his fist forward. His knuckles connected with the rough stone, the wall exploding outwards from the force of the blow. A cold blast of air rushed into the corridor from the hole he had created, blasting his face with dust and debris as the sconces went out. Kurogane coughed and blinked, eyes narrowed against
the dust. He could feel the kid's aura just at the edge of his field of perception, flickering like a candle flame about to go out. He only paused long enough for his vision to adjust to the darkness. He could sense the kid just fine but he wanted to know where he was going before he jumped through the hole he had created. A red-tinted light filtered in through a hole in the roof of the huge cavern that appeared to constitute the other side.

Bending down, Kurogane retrieved the fallen staff before stepping through the destroyed wall.

Something wet sloshed against his feet and Kurogane looked down in surprise, realizing that he was standing in a pool of knee-deep water.

This place must be a part of the reservoir, he thought, tightening his grip on the staff as he cautiously moved towards the place where he could sense Syaoran's flickering aura. He used that sixth sense to keep track of the kid, all the while trying to locate the thing that had made the boy scream like that. Kurogane was acutely aware of his missing arm, knowing that it put him at a disadvantage against his invisible foe. He moved deeper and deeper into the cavern, reaching out with his sixth sense to affirm that Syaoran hadn't moved from his location. He hadn't. Strangely enough, Kurogane couldn't pick up on any other presence beyond his own and the kid's, though this only made his unease grow the closer he got to Syaoran's location.

Up ahead, Kurogane could see a stone platform in the middle of the pool. And on top of the platform, he saw the familiar form of the kid crouched over something with his back turned towards him. Water flowed down the rocks, echoing across the walls of the cavern, adding to the sound of water sloshing around Kurogane's feet. If the enemy was still hiding somewhere in the shadows, they would know exactly where Kurogane was, but somehow, despite the noise he was making, Syaoran appeared not to have noticed him.

"Kid?" he whispered, his gaze darting all over the cavern as he drew closer and closer to the boy.

Syaoran didn't reply, though as Kurogane drew closer, he could see someone lying in front of the boy. But their face was hidden from his line of sight.

"Kid, you okay?" he asked again as he cautiously climbed the steps of the stone platform. A dark liquid dripped down the steps, adding to the water below, and Kurogane felt an invisible hand squeeze his heart as he picked up the metallic stench of blood. "Oi, kid! Answer me." He raced towards the boy, but the kid gave no response. "Hey, are you hurt?"

"You didn't come," the boy finally said, though he didn't turn around. Kurogane felt his trepidation rise at the strange, raspy growl in his voice.

"I came as fast as I could."

"He called for you," Syaoran said, appearing not to have heard Kurogane as he slowly began to rise. However, Kurogane's attention was drawn by the spread-eagled form on the floor. Dark liquid pooled beneath the unmoving body. "He begged you to help him. But you were too late."

"Who's that?"

He said nothing as he stepped to the side, allowing Kurogane to see the person's face, and Kurogane's heart plummeted. Lying on the floor, with his bloodless face frozen in untold agony, eyes wide and lips parted in a soundless scream, was also Syaoran. His horror turned to fury as he grit his teeth, rounding on the boy who dared to impersonate the kid.

"You killed him?" he growled, adjusting his grip on the staff as he took up a fighting stance.
"You killed him," The impersonator growled back as he whirled around, and Kurogane was momentarily taken aback by what he saw. The impersonator was also the kid, but he looked wrong, with his lips peeled back in a feral expression to expose his fangs. Inhuman, catlike eyes glared at him from underneath blood-drenched bangs, with foot-long claws extended from every single finger.

The kid's a vampire…

"YOU KILLED ME!" the kid snarled, flashing across the short distance separating them. Kurogane had fought against vampires before, but none of them, not even that pureblood Kamui, had moved as fast as Syaoran did. Kurogane had barely raised the staff to defend himself against the oncoming attack when the kid's claws ripped through his throat.

The staff fell to the floor as Kurogane staggered back, raising his hand to press at the bleeding gashes in his neck as he gasped and choked on his own blood. Reeling from the shock, he stumbled and lost his balance. And then he was falling and falling and falling…

But his back never met the water's surface, for his surroundings suddenly shifted. The kid and the vampire, the bloody moon, the reservoir and the cavern—everything faded from his vision, morphing into the royal gardens of Shirasagi Castle.

The impact with the ground knocked the air out of his lungs, but suddenly, he was no longer choking. He grasped at his healed throat, trying to catch his breath, the feeling of almost-suffocating still too real in his mind.

It was just a dream, he assured himself. The kid is fine. He's still alive.

Sakura petals rained down from the trees as a gentle breeze stirred the leaves. A tingle of familiar magic brushed against the edges of his consciousness, and he shot upright, wildly searching his surroundings for its source, but he was alone.

The air to his left rippled like the surface of a pond, and a strand of magic parted the space, creating a tunnel into the emptiness that existed between dimensions. Immediately on his guard, Kurogane searched his surroundings for a weapon, noticing with some irritation that his arm was still missing.

I'm still dreaming, he thought in dismay as he suddenly remembered that he was still bedridden in Cavahall. There was no way he could have made it back to Nihon without his companions. The only conclusion that he could draw for his nightmare shifting to a neutral setting was that he had subconsciously anticipated the arrival of whoever it was that was coming. They might have inadvertently saved Kurogane from his nightmares, but Kurogane didn't like the idea of someone invading his mind, even if it was just through a dream.

The only people that he trusted enough to allow inside his head were Tomoyo, the mage, and perhaps the kid and the princess. Out of all four, only Tomoyo and the princess possessed the ability to consciously dreamwalk, but Tomoyo had given hers up as a price and he couldn't think of a reason for the princess to reach out to him in this manner. With the nightmare still fresh in his mind, Kurogane wanted nothing more than to attack the person entering his dream, but he knew he couldn't do that on the off chance that it was the princess coming to see him.

But he crouched low to the ground, adjusting his stance to take into account his missing arm as he prepared to launch an attack in case the newcomer was hostile. A shadow appeared against the rippling surface and Kurogane tensed in anticipation. However, when the shadow transformed into Tomoyo's smiling form, Kurogane froze where he was.
"Did I come at a bad time?" Her lavender eyes twinkled with mischief as she stepped through the portal and into his dream.

"What the...Tomoyo?" Kurogane couldn't help the surprise that colored his tone as he felt her familiar presence in his mind. He relaxed his stance and stood up. "How the hell are you here?"

"Not even so much as a 'hello Tomoyo. It's good to see you.'" Tomoyo pretended to look affronted, but smiled as she walked closer. "Tactless as ever, Kurogane."

"No, I didn't mean it like that." He scowled, looking away when he felt the heat rise to his face. "I was just surprised to see you here. I thought you couldn't dreamwalk anymore."

"I can't." She shook her head before turning away to observe the gardens. Birds chirped in the branches of the sakura trees as she moved to sit on a bench beneath the biggest tree. The sunlight filtering through the leaves and petals fell in a patchwork of light and shadows across her face, shimmering against her hair when she tilted her head to one side. She patted the empty space beside her in invitation, glancing up at him through her lashes.

Kurogane eyed her warily, wondering if she was a trick or some sort. Sure, she felt real, but she had just admitted that she couldn't dreamwalk. Then this couldn't really be her, could it?

"You're wondering how I'm here if I can't walk through dreams." Tomoyo smiled in the way she always did when she thought he was being paranoid. "Don't worry, Kurogane, it's me."

"Well?" he demanded as he tried to cross his arms, only to remember that he couldn't with one missing limb. Tomoyo giggled before reaching out to catch a falling blossom.

"You see me for the first time in months, and you're still rude," she chastised as she cradled the blossom in her lap. "I'd have thought you would be happy to see me."

"I would be if I knew how the hell you were here in the first place."

"Sakura-chan taught me a spell," Tomoyo said. "She can dreamwalk, but she doesn't possess control over her ability. So she tried to develop a spell to aid her in the process. We met in a dream a few weeks ago, and she agreed to teach it to me because her spell doesn't allow for true dreamwalking. But it can imitate the process enough for a meeting like this to happen."

"So you're saying the princess taught you a spell that lets you get around your payment?" he quirked a brow.

"It's not really getting around my payment if I can't see the future or influence someone else's dream, is it?" Tomoyo gave him a sly grin before giving him an impatient look. "Now, if you are finished with your interrogation, then come here and kiss me."

"The Tomoyo I know would never make a demand like that."

"I have had a troublesome week," she said, her shoulders slumping by a fraction of an inch. Even if it was just a dream and it was only her and Kurogane, Tomoyo would have never displayed such weakness under normal circumstances. She had always been a perfect example of calm collectiveness. But the longer he watched her, sitting there on the bench with the sunlight playing across her face, the more his suspicions about her identity lessened. An imposter wouldn't have known her well enough to imitate the way she looked when she was tired. That slight slip in her posture only ever appeared when she was deeply troubled and only when she was around the handful of people she trusted enough to show her weakness. None of them had any reason to impersonate Tomoyo, and fewer still possessed the ability to do so.
“Troublesome, how?” he asked as he crossed the short distance between them and came to sit beside her on the bench. A few years ago, Kurogane would have considered such informality with Tomoyo improper and disrespectful. But then again, a few years ago, he had been nothing more than a ninja who had vowed to protect his sovereign. Things were different between them now, though, and he could afford to be a little informal with her. Not even hesitating for a moment, he reached out for her hand, brushing his calloused fingers over her smooth skin as he pulled her closer to him. "What’s wrong?"

“The onii are amassing near the borders,” she said, allowing him to pull her to his side as she leaned into his touch. Her hair brushed against his lone arm as she rested her head against him. “They're behaving exactly how they were when you left to battle against Fei Wang Reed.”

“What do you mean, exactly the same way?” he asked, his spine going rigid at the thought of the butt-chinned bastard. "I killed him. Are you saying he's come back?"

“No, Fei Wang Reed is still dead," she assured him with a shake of her head, "but there is a shift that is rippling across the barriers between the worlds. The mikos have been reporting about it for weeks, and even I can feel it happening. Reality and logic are straining to hold together in the face of what is coming."

"If the bastard is still dead, how can it be happening again?" He frowned, pensively staring down at their joined hands as Tomoyo laced her fingers through his.

"I don't know," she admitted in a whisper. "I have been trying to figure out a reason for this sudden change but I…don’t know. And that worries me."

"How bad is the situation with the onii?"

"It's nothing I can't handle, for now," Tomoyo said, turning to give him an assuring smile. "The wards along the borders are still holding strong, and the border patrols can handle the few stray onii that manage to slip through."

He stared at her, marveling at the quiet strength that shone across her gentle face. Her hands were soft and her fingers warm and comforting whenever they brushed against his skin. She was graceful and charming and she always smelled like a mix of blooming flowers, rain in the summer, and the incense that was always burning in the shrines where she maintained the wards. The fragrance of the incense that still lingered about her reminded him of his mother, and Kurogane squeezed her hand to remind himself that Tomoyo was truly there.

"Kurogane?" The smile slipped off her face as she gave him a worried look.

"Get Souma to keep watch over you when you're in the shrines," he said in a tone that let her know he wouldn't take no for answer. He knew he couldn’t force her to do anything she didn't want to, but he still hoped that, for once, she would do as he asked.

"Souma is my sister's guard Kurogane, you know that just as well as I," she reminded him, and he ground his teeth together as he tried to think of someone else that was suited for the job. "What is this about, Kurogane?"

"I don't like this at all, Tomoyo," he confessed darkly, clenching his jaw so hard it hurt. "The onii are gathering near our borders and… this is exactly how things began in Suwa when my mother —"He shook his head before turning away, though he didn’t let go of her hand. "Just get someone to protect you in the shrines. Have Takashi and Kamina do it. I swear, as soon as I find the kid and the mage, I'm having the manjuu bring us to Nihon."
"Kurogane, this isn't the first time that the onii have gathered outside of our borders," Tomoyo said as she traced his knuckles with a delicate thumb.

"But you said it yourself," he turned back to face her, frowning in frustration when she merely gave him an indulgent smile, "this feels different. And you're worried about it too. You have to get—what?" he cut off with a scowl when started to giggle. "What's so funny?"

"You're so cute when you get protective of me," she said between bouts of giggles. Kurogane's scowl deepened.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? Of course I'm protective of you. I swore an oath to you."

"Is that the only reason?" The corners of her mouth tugged upwards in a teasing grin and Kurogane felt a surge of annoyance at her lighthearted behavior.

Here I am trying to make sure she stays safe until I get home and she has the gall to think that I'm — he suppressed the urge to shudder in disgust—cute.

"Really, Kurogane," she laughed, amusement dancing across her beautiful face, "I know it's a little worrisome that the pattern seems to be reestablishing itself, but I'll be fine."

Kurogane growled as he swooped down on her, smashing their mouths together with the intention of wiping that smile off her lips. She stiffened at the suddenness of the gesture, though her hesitance lasted only for a moment as she melted into his touch, kissing back with fervor. He untangled their fingers, moving his hand to the back of her head as he deepened the kiss, her words suddenly making more sense when she turned sideways on the bench and wrapped her arms around his neck. He gently eased her back on the bench before pulling his hand out from under her. Using it to support his weight, he drew away long enough to meet her twinkling eyes before lowering his head next to her ear.

"You did that on purpose," he rumbled low in his throat as he turned his head to trail kisses along her jaw.

"How else was I going to have you kiss me when you wouldn't stop worrying?" she breathed.

"Manipulative she-devil," Kurogane whispered against her lips, though there was no bite to his words.

"You wouldn't have me any other way," Tomoyo replied before she tightened her arms around his neck and made him close the distance between them. Her fingers raked through his hair and trailed down his back as he explored her mouth.

"I mean it, though," he said when they pulled apart for air. "You better get Takashi and Kamina as your personal guard."

"It's already been done," she told him as she cupped his face in her palms, looking very pleased with herself as she continued. "I knew how much you trusted those two after Souma, so I had them both assigned to my guard weeks ago."

Kurogane's only response to that was to wrap his arm around her waist as he rolled off the bench, pulling her with him as he went. Tomoyo shrieked in surprise as she fell on top of him, her warm body pressed up against his as he lay in the grass. Her hair fell in a dark curtain around their faces as she braced herself, with her hands pressed against the ground on either side of his shoulders. Her cheeks flushed when she realized that she was straddling his hips and she quickly slid off him, falling on her back in the grass beside him as she looked away.
Silence filled the air between them, punctuated only by the sound of the chirping birds and their own breathing. Kurogane turned his head to watch her smile at the sun as it beat down against their skin. A light breeze rustled the branches overhead, sending another shower of pink blossoms over them and he stared as a stray petal fell against her cheek. He reached up and brushed it away, only to have her catch his hand on the way down.

Saying nothing at all, she twined their fingers once more, but the peaceful spell was broken when she spoke.

"What did you mean earlier," she asked, looking pensive as she met his gaze, "when you said something about finding Syaoran-kun and Fai-san? Are you separated from them?"

"We arrived in Cavahall over a fortnight ago, but I landed separately from the others," he said, and the worry for his companions that had been somehow pushed to the back of his mind made its return. His mind drifted to the versions of the kid that he had seen in his nightmare and the fleeting blur of the mage's back that he had caught on the rainy night when he'd gotten shot. "This world isn't safe for people with magic, but I haven't been able to find anyone so far and that worries me. But I don't even have the manjuu around to make a wish to get everyone together."

Not that I want to rely on a wish...

"Have you tried leaving them messages while searching?" Tomoyo asked. "It is possible that one of them might see it at some point."

"I... got hurt a while back and... I haven't been able to look for them for a few days," Kurogane admitted quietly.

"Is that why you're missing your arm?"

"The bastards taking care of me took it away because they think I'm some mindless weapon created to take down their leaders."

"Didn't you try explaining things to them?"

"I did, but..." He hesitated, thinking about how to word the rest of his story. Did he want to tell her about the jaded Tomoyo of Cavahall and how hard life was for her? And what had become of Steel, Cavahall's equivalent of Kurogane himself? He looked at Tomoyo, who was patiently waiting for him to continue, and decided that there was no reason to hide anything from her. "I look like the guy who used to lead them before their Tomoyo took over when he went missing. Since I'm in Cavahall now, that guy is obviously dead, but they seem to think that I was created as a replacement for him. I've tried explaining everything to them, but their Tomoyo doesn't believe me. By the time I'm strong enough to fight my way out of that place, it might be too late for the kid."

"I can try and talk to Sakura-chan if you'd like," Tomoyo said after a while. "She developed the dreamwalking spell so that she could talk to Syaoran-kun while you were all traveling. Maybe she can relay the information about your location to him. It is possible that Syaoran-kun and Fai-san are together somewhere so they can come and get you instead."

"Sure, if it'll work." He shrugged, running a hand through his hair as he glared up at the blue sky. "It'd be better if there was some way to convince the idiots holding me to return my arm though. But their Tomoyo doesn't trust me so I might have to leave it behind if it came down to it."

"Because you look like her Kurogane?"
"Steel. He went by the name of Steel," Kurogane said, answering her question without really acknowledging anything.

"Then I'll talk to her as well," Tomoyo promised him. The very next second, he felt another brush of familiar magic against his mind and he shot upright, his eyes wide.

"Mage," he gasped even as Fai's magic retreated.

"Kurogane, what's wrong?"

"I just felt the—" His next words were abruptly cut off as something big slammed into his chest, wrenching his consciousness from the dreamworld before he could even say goodbye.

The heart monitor beeped frantically as Kurogane jolted to awareness, wheezing as something heavy pushed down on his chest. The 'something' on top of him turned out to be someone who let out a frightened squeak and hurriedly scrambled off him.

"What the hell?" Kurogane rasped as he tried to push himself into a sitting position. His arm gave out under him, and he fell back into the mattress.

"Are you Kurogane?" squeaked the woman who had nearly choked the life out of him. Turning his head, Kurogane noticed that her flimsy dress was flecked with blood, though she didn't appear to be injured.

"Who the hell is asking?" he growled, immediately making note of the series of characters tattooed into her skin, just below the collarbone.

That looks like the stuff The Company brands its slaves with, his mind supplied automatically as he thought back to the pictures he had seen of the Unnaturals being auctioned. But what would one of their slaves be doing inside the Liberalists base of operations? Unless, of course, she was one of those that had been bought by the Liberalists and set free. But why send her to his room? Maybe she was another attempt to check the validity of his claims. He wouldn't put it past them to try and see if Kurogane would betray them to someone he presumed to be from The Company.

"I-I'm 147," the woman whispered as she tangled her fingers in the edge of her dress. She was barefooted and Kurogane could see bits of grass sticking to her skin.

I don't remember there being any grass in this place when that blind idiot brought me in.

"Are you Kurogane?" she asked again, her frightened gaze darting all over the room, lingering over the machinery that Masooma had stuck him with to monitor his condition.

"I am." He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "Why are you asking?"

"224 said you would keep me safe," 147 murmured as she approached him, her brown eyes focused on his bandaged chest that had begun to be stained with red once more, "but you're hurt."

"Who is 224?" he asked, his heart sinking at the realization that he might already know the answer.

"Your friend," she said as she came to stand over him, her fingers reaching for his chest. He caught her hand before she could touch him.

"I don't have any friends called 224."

"He also said his name was Fai," 147 said as she looked at him with her big, terrified eyes. "Please
"The mage sent you?" Kurogane subconsciously tightened his grip on her wrist, and she gave a frightened squeak. "Where is he? Is the kid with him?"

"Please don't hurt me," she whimpered instead of answering his questions and Kurogane felt a surge of irritation rush through him.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Answer the damn questions," he growled. "Where the fuck is the mage? Was the kid with him? Are they okay?"

"I don't know," she cried as she tried to tug her hand free. "224 is still at The Company. Please don't hurt me. I don't know anything else."

It was only when he saw the tears trailing down her pale skin that he realized he was being cruel. He let go of her and she immediately darted away from him.

"224 said you were a friend," the girl sobbed as she cradled her arm close to her chest, watching him through bloodshot eyes as she cowered in the corner. Guilt and shame bubbled up inside him at the sight of the bruises forming on her skin.

"Oh, shit." Kurogane ran a hand through his hair. The mage had sent this woman to him in the hope that he could keep her safe. And he had gone and hurt her instead. "He was right. I am a friend. I'm not going to hurt you again."

147 said nothing in return as she continued nursing her bruised wrist.

Kurogane struggled to sit up, sliding out of the bed with some effort. The machines beeped in alarm as the sensors disconnected from his skin when he started to stagger in her direction. 147 whimpered in fright, but she didn't move even as Kurogane fell to his knees in front of her. A wave of exhaustion washed over him, but he managed to stay upright, drawing strength from the knowledge that this girl knew where the mage was.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said, trying to mask the frustration in his tone. The only way he could get a more concrete location from her was if she wasn't afraid of him. "The blond idiot is my friend, and if he promised you my protection, I will protect you."

She stopped crying to stare at him, her brown eyes once again dropping to the bloodstained bandages wrapped around his torso.

"You're hurt," she finally said, reaching out to touch his chest with her bruised hand. Kurogane didn't want the strange girl to touch his injuries, but he didn't try to stop her this time. Her tiny palm pressed against the gauze, and he let out a pained hiss, even as he felt a tingle of magic spread along his skin.

"You better not be dead!"

Kurogane jumped away from 147 as soon as the door burst open, and Masooma raced inside, her expression frantic. He turned around just in time to see her give the empty bed a confused stare before she saw him kneeling on the ground in front of 147. "What the hell is going on?"

"You promised," 147 whispered as she tried to hide behind him.

"How did she get in here?" Masooma demanded as she took a step in their direction. "And why am I picking up on magical residue of a teleportation spell?" Keeping an eye on them, she reached for
"the portable comm-link that Kurogane had seen all the Liberalists carrying around with them.
"Nixon, get down here, will you?" Turning her attention back to Kurogane, she narrowed her eyes.
"You didn't answer my question, Kurogane."

The kid or the mage might have been able to think of a better, less complicated explanation for
147's presence, but Kurogane didn't possess their skill when it came to inventing stories, so he went
with the truth. "The mage sent her."

"Your magician friend that's been missing all this time?" She quirked an unimpressed brow.

"Yeah. 147 says he's stuck at The Company."

"I'm here." Nixon chose that moment to saunter through the door. "Take a guess at who just located
you missing friends." Holding up his fingers to point at himself, he grinned at Kurogane. "Me,
that's who."

"Are they at The Company, by any chance?" Masooma asked as she shot Kurogane a dirty look.

"How did you know?" Nixon's grin slid off his face as he turned to his girlfriend.

"Take a look at who's hiding behind our resident imposter," she replied and Kurogane bristled in
anger.

"For the last fucking time, I am not an imposter."

"How did she get in here?" Nixon asked as he peeked around Kurogane to look at 147.

"Apparently, his missing magician friend sent her here," Masooma said in a dry tone, her
expression disdainful. Kurogane couldn't understand what he'd done to suddenly earn her mistrust,
but it was obvious that she didn't believe him about 147 teleporting into his room even if she could
sense the magic. Surprisingly enough, Nixon's reaction was completely unexpected as he turned
back to Kurogane in excitement.

"Seriously? 224 sent her here?"

"You knew where the mage was?" Kurogane growled as he jumped to his feet. Unlike every other
time, however, he didn't feel the sense of vertigo or even the weakness of his limbs that had
accompanied the action of standing ever since he'd gotten shot. He touched his hand to the bullet
wounds in his chest, feeling only a faint throb at the sight of each injury. "Why the fuck didn't you
tell me before?"

"Whoa, whoa, easy there, fake Steel." Nixon held up his hands in defense even as his girlfriend
readied her magic to stop Kurogane if needed. "I only found out about your friends half an hour
ago. I hacked into The Company databases last night, and I've been going through their latest
records. I was going to come see you once I was finished." He paused to stare at 147, looking
awestruck as he turned back to Kurogane, "Did he really just send an Unnatural here?"

"He did," Kurogane snapped. "Now if you're done fawning over him, tell me where he is. And give
me back my arm and my sword. We need to find the kid and get the hell out of this place."

"Oh, I umm… Kurogane, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news…but…" Nixon hesitated, looking
distinctly uncomfortable as he scratched the back of his head. Dread sunk its claws into Kurogane's
gut, squeezing painfully as the silence dragged out between them.

"Spit it out already!" Kurogane barked and saw with some satisfaction that, for all their bravado,
both Nixon and the healer jumped.

"Your younger friend is dead," Nixon said. "He was killed in action during the raid where we found you."

Chapter End Notes

And now both Kurogane and Fai think that Syaoran is dead. Anyone wants to guess how Kurogane will react to this news?
Yuui ran a towel through his wet hair as he emerged from the bathroom, steam from the shower swirling past him as he paused at the threshold. A beam of weak sunlight fell across the floor from a gap in the curtains. An ancient analog clock ticked away the seconds as the hour drew to a close. He walked inside just as the clock gave a loud twang to indicate that it was ten in the morning. Solaris made a face as she woke, her dark hair spilling over one creamy shoulder as she sat up, lazily pulling the sheets up with one hand as she eyed Yuui.

"Leaving already, Break?" she asked with a quirk of her brow. Yuui dropped the towel on the plush carpet covering her floor and walked over to where he had discarded his clothes last night.

"When have I ever stayed for breakfast, love?" he asked, grabbing his jeans. "Really, though, did you have to tear my shirt to shreds?" he said, casting a mournful look to the tattered remains of what he had been wearing the previous night. Sighing, he picked up his purple hoodie and pulled it on.

"You were taking too long to get it off," Solaris said with a wicked grin.

"So you decided to use your lovely assets and destroy it?"

"Of course," she fell back into the pillows, "and I had been hoping you'd stay a little longer."

"You don't want that, love." Yuui shook his head. "I'm only good for a casual fling."

"A girl can dream, can't she?" Solaris countered evenly.

"I'd be a terrible boyfriend, Solaris," Yuui said.

"I'm sure I could cure you of your cheating habits," she suggested playfully, sighing in defeat when Yuui said nothing. "I left some fruit on the counter last night. Take something before you go."

"Have you seen my left shoe?" Yuui asked as he tied the laces on the right one.

"You kicked it off in the hallway. I'm going back to sleep," Solaris grumbled as she turned away from him, the sheets slipping down to expose the smooth expanse of her back.

"I'll lock the door when I leave," Yuui promised as he slipped out.

True to her word, Solaris had left some fruit in a plastic basket on the countertop. Yuui grabbed an apple, waiting to hear the beep of the lock on her front door before biting in.

Out in the streets, the sun struggled to break through the perpetual cloud cover that hung over Cavahall, admitting defeat and vanishing altogether by the time Yuui discarded the apple core. He glanced at the holographic clock hovering above the street, cursing under his breath when he realized it was nearly half-past ten. He'd barely make it to the other side of the city in time for his first meeting. So he broke out into a quick jog, cursing the fact that Xerxes Break wasn't supposed to be rich enough to afford his transport.

"Wotcher, Break," said a perky waitress with short, spiky, pink hair when he finally arrived at his destination twenty minutes later. "Your friend hasn't arrived yet."

"Thank you, Tonks," he said, giving the girl a charming grin as he moved to sit at an unoccupied
"So, what will it be today, Mr. Sexy Accent?"

"Don't let your boyfriend hear you calling me that, love. I don't want an angry Lupine coming after me for stealing his girl," Yuui teased as he leaned back in his chair. It was only in the Liberalist-controlled sectors of Cavahall that one could openly talk about Unnaturals without fear of being picked up by Company goons, so Tonks merely returned his grin with one of her own.

"Oh, Remus knows he's got nothing to worry about."

"If you say so." He chuckled before picking up a laminated menu from the tabletop. He scanned the list for a moment, glancing towards the door when the bell chimed. A black-haired boy of fifteen rolled in on a wheelchair, and Yuui dropped the menu. "I'll have two scoops of dark chocolate, and my friend will be having a large caramel crunch."

Noting the boy coming towards them, Tonks hurriedly removed a chair from the table to make space for the boy to sit, giving him the same cheerful greeting she had given Yuui as she walked past him.

"You're the only adult I know who insists on getting me ice cream for breakfast," the teen said by way of greeting as he settled at the table.

"Don't say it like it's a bad thing, you brat," Yuui drawled.

"It's good to see you too, Break. I'm doing great. Thanks for asking."

"I was getting there, Kamaji." Yuui rolled his eyes. "I'm guessing you had another row with your mother since you're being snarky with me so early in the morning."

"It's nearly eleven," he snapped, making a face. "And, if you must know, yes, I did have a row with the crazy woman who calls herself my mother."

"Is she still insisting that you wear the prosthetics she got you last year?"

"She doesn't get that I prefer the wheelchair." Kamaji sighed, pulling at the bangs that were falling over his eyes, exposing the blond hair that had begun to show at the roots.

"Well, she did spend a lot of money to get you the legs," Yuui pointed out as Tonks arrived with their orders.

"Here you go, boys," Tonks said as she sauntered away.

The teen waited until she was gone before speaking.

"I never asked her to spend it on me," he grumbled as he stabbed the spoon into his ice cream. "On top of that, she doesn't want me to associate with Liberalists anymore. Who the hell does she think she is, trying to dictate who my friends are? You don't see me complaining about her associating with the bastards who took away my dad."

"She works at a hospital, Kamaji," Yuui said as he eyed the way Kamaji continued stabbing at the frozen treat.

"A hospital that's funded by The Company." The boy stopped to glare at Yuui. "They took away my dad and threw him into the Gladiator Program, and that woman prefers to pretend he died in a
tragic accident."

"All right, all right," Yuui said as he picked up a spoon and dug in. "No more talk about your unreasonable mother. Eat your breakfast before it melts."

"Did you know that Steel is back?" Kamaji said as he moodily picked at his ice cream.

"I wasn't aware of that," Yuui said, letting a bit of curiosity color his tone.

"He is." Kamaji nodded. "I saw him heading towards the hospital with Nixon a few days back. But he kind of looked like shit, and he was missing an arm. And," the teen paused, glancing around for a moment before lowering his voice as he leaned towards Yuui, "I think he might have lost his mind during the time he was missing."

"Really?" Yuui let his eyebrows rise in surprise. "What makes you say that?"

"I might have overheard him raving about being from another world when I dropped by at the hospital to see Masooma."

"That does sound a little strange," Yuui agreed, biting back a pleased grin as he took another bite of his ice cream.

_Heh, what a small world?_ Yuui thought as Kamaji launched into an account of what he had gathered from Steel's ravings and his personal theories on what it meant. _I seem to have found all of Mokona's friends._

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Fai came to with a weak groan, his whole body shuddering as it tried to reject the Cerellium still embedded in his flesh. He tried not to whimper when his skin sizzled as soon as it came into contact with the bars of his tiny cage. He barely had any room to move, but even so, he tried to curl in on himself, trying to get as much distance between himself and the Cerellium bars as possible.

Rubber soles squeaked against the tiled floor somewhere behind him, letting Fai know that he wasn't alone. It only took him a moment to realize that he was still trapped inside The Company. He closed his eyes, trying not to despair as a wave of disappointment washed over him.

_I was so close..._ he thought mournfully.

Cold fingers grabbed hold of his hair and used the grip to pull his head to one side, nearly touching his face to the Cerellium bars in the process. Fai hissed at the rough treatment, but the person holding him didn't seem too bothered as they only tugged harder to expose his throat. A cold needle pressed against his jugular, piercing through the flesh, flushing a cool liquid into his bloodstream with a sharp click.

"I don't understand why Director Bia won't let me put you in Research and Development. Or even the Breeding Program," a familiar voice said, though Fai couldn't recall where he had last heard it. All he knew was that it wasn't Naba, though he didn't know if he wanted to be happy about the change or worried. "You would have been such a wonderful specimen to study."

He shuddered as the cold spread through his body, slowly concentrating around the bullets inside him. He gritted his teeth as the cold sensation was slowly replaced by an uncomfortable warmth that had him sweating in less than a minute.

"What did you do to me?" he demanded, gasping in shock as the warmth morphed into a burn.
"Don't worry, I just gave you a nanite shot to extract the Cerellium from your body," the woman said dismissively, and it was then that Fai finally recognized the voice.

"Akira," he hissed venomously as the female scientist stepped into his field of vision. The woman in question merely quirked a brow at his display of hostility before she entered a code to unlock the cage and took a step back. As soon as the door clicked open, Fai exploded out of cage, his lips peeled back in a vicious snarl. He wrapped his hands around the woman's neck as he pushed her into the wall. "Syaoran-kun is dead because of you!"

"No… I didn't—" Akira started to say, but Fai squeezed his fingers around her throat, cutting off her excuse. Her hands clawed at his arms, uselessly trying to make him let go.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't snap your neck right now," he spat.

"You'll… die… the nanites…" She choked, her legs flailing beneath her as Fai tightened his grip even further.

"I'll be gone before anyone notices you're dead." Her eyes bulged in their sockets as Fai began to lift her off the ground.

"Leave this room… they explode—" Her lips began to turn blue from the lack of air as she weakly beat at his hands.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he growled, loosening his hold on her just enough to let her answer.

"The nanites act as… range limiters," she gasped.

"Explain," Fai demanded as he exposed his claws. He felt a vindictive pleasure in watching the way she flinched when one claw nicked her skin. He bared his fangs, grinning at the terror that shone in her eyes.

"They're keyed-in to this room," she answered in a rushed manner. "If you walk out without deactivating them, the explosives mounted on them go off and you die."

"You know how to deactivate them?"

"I might," she answered suddenly appearing less afraid of him now that she wasn't choking, "but if you think I'll do that for you, think again."

Fai glared at her, digging his claws deeper into her skin, but she seemed to be regaining her composure.

"You should let go of me now, 224." She smirked at him.

"You're in no position to be making demands. I could rip out your throat before you could draw another breath."

"But you won't," she pointed out with a smug look on her face. "If I die, you have no way of leaving this room alive."

"If you're not going to deactivate them, I'd rather die with satisfaction, knowing that I killed you first."

"You're bluffing, 224." She laughed, pressing her throat into his claws. Fai hoped his shock at the
gesture didn't show on his face as her smirk widened. "You don't strike me as the suicidal type."

"You don't know anything about me."

"Perhaps not." She shrugged. "But I do know this: You've got someone in the city that you want to
get to, and you won't be able to do that if you're dead."

Fai thought of Kurogane and Mokona, waiting for him somewhere in Cavahall. He thought of
Sakura and her sweet smile and her sparkling green eyes. And he thought about how the light in
them would dim upon hearing the news of Syaoran's death. Maybe once upon a time, he might
have considered his own death a fair trade for the life he had unwillingly taken once again, but
now…he'd rather be there to help Sakura pick up the pieces than to let her grieve the death of two
loved ones.

"See? You're not really going to kill me," Akira said as she seemed to notice Fai's hesitation. "Now,
how about you let go of me, and we put this silly little act of defiance behind us? I'm only allowed
a limited amount of time with you, and I'd much rather spend it collecting my samples."

"I could make you deactivate the nanites," Fai said coldly.

"And I could activate the explosives embedded in them instead."

"You could be lying about the nature of the nanites," he ventured.

"You're welcome to try out that theory if you want," she said, giving him a sly look as she
continued, "but are you really going to gamble your life on the chance that I might be trying to trick
you?"

Fai grit his teeth in frustration as doubt began to settle in. He could try and risk everything, but if
she was telling the truth, he'd be dead before he could find someone to disable the explosives.

"You see, 224?" she said when she saw his resolve crumble. "You don't have any leverage against
me. You could kill me and you'd be dead anyway, or you could let go of me and let me do my
work, and maybe I can let you out of this room."

Fai didn't miss the fact that she said nothing about deactivating the nanites, but he knew he didn't
have much of a choice. Until he figured out a way to disarm the explosives, he couldn't risk
another attempt at escape. She knows she's got me backed into a corner.

"So, what will it be, 224?"

"My name is Fai." He glared, though he did let go of her.

"I see that Naba didn't manage to break your spirit after all." Akira massaged her throat as she
walked around him. The Cerellium cage that he had woken up in now lay on its side on the floor.
Without sparing him another glance, she bent down and pushed it under a work bench cluttered
with delicate-looking tools and instruments that Fai couldn't even begin to understand the purpose
of. Opposite to the work bench was a metal table, much like the one that he had been tied to when
Akira and Kyle had inserted the implant into his spine all those weeks ago.

How long have I been here? He wondered distantly as he watched Akira type a series of
instructions into a holographic screen.

"What are you going to do to me?" he asked in an attempt to distract himself when his mind flashed
back to the day she had made him turn Syaoran.
"Oh nothing much," Akira said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Originally, you were only brought here to get that nanite shot and have the bullets removed, but I convinced the directors to let me have you for the whole day. Now, I'll be collecting samples from you for my research."

"What sort of samples?" He narrowed his eyes as he remembered what Naba had said to him. He found it a little surprising that Akira was choosing to answer his questions now when she had treated him just as condescendingly as everyone else in The Company before.

"A little bit of everything, really," she said without looking away from the screen. Fai came to stand behind her. Now that she had convinced him of the futility of trying to murder her, she didn't appear worried about what he did. He stared at her unguarded back, imagining how easy it would be for him to kill her where she sat. She was the reason Syaoran was dead.

_It will be so easy to kill her right now_, Fai thought as he slowly unsheathed his claws. _I can avenge Syaoran-kun and let Kurogane deliver the bad news to Sakura-chan. She'll be devastated, but she's a strong girl. She'll learn to move on._

Fai pulled back his arm, preparing to stab his sharpened nails through Akira's back when he heard Kurogane's voice inside his mind.

*Go ahead. Take the easy way out. Act like the coward you truly are. It's not like you owe it to the princess to explain why the kid died because of your weakness.*

Fai's hand froze inches from Akira's spine, his eyes widening as he stared at the words she was typing without really registering anything. Cavahall's script was a lot like the one used in Ceres, though with his mind still reeling from what the echo of Kurogane's voice had said, Fai couldn't be bothered to try and understand it. He staggered away from the scientist with a small gasp. His bare back collided with the chill of the metal table, but he barely even noticed it, realizing with some surprise that his hands were trembling.

_What am I doing?_ He thought, bringing a shaking hand to the same level as his eyes, staring at his claws like they belonged to someone else. _I can't die like this. I have to be the one to tell Sakura-chan about what happened to Syaoran-kun. She deserves to hear the whole truth from me._

"Get on the table, 224," Akira ordered as she finally turned around to face him, quirking a brow at his unsheathed claws. Immediately, Fai slammed an emotionless mask on his face as he shrunk his claws.

"Why?"

"Because I need to collect tissue samples, and I can't do that if you're standing up," she snapped as she walked over and pushed him on the table herself. "I'm going to take what I want, whether you like it or not. Though for the sake of saving myself from a headache and you from a lot of unnecessary pain, it's best if you cooperate."

"What you going to do?" Fai asked, stubbornly remaining in a seated position.

"Are you deaf?" Akira looked irritated now as she pushed on his chest, digging her nails into his skin as she forced him down on the table. "And here I thought you were actually intelligent. Now stay still," she instructed as she held up an empty syringe and used it to draw his blood. "Don't move," she ordered again as she started to put it away.

"Are you going to use that to turn more people?"

"Of course not," Akira said as Fai watched her transfer his blood into a glass tube. "According to
my research on the process of transformations, only blood given from a willing Vampirosa can trigger a successful transformation. All my test-subjects went insane within a day of turning, regardless of the sire. I even tried using a pureblood as a blood source, but it's always the same result. I had hoped that I could cause you to trigger a release of the sanity hormone with the Neural Implant when you turned your apprentice, but I guess I was mistaken about how much it could influence you."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Fai didn't bother to hide his suspicion. She's being far too cooperative. He glared at her back through narrowed eyes as watched her move about her work table. She doesn't have to answer me at all and yet she's not even offended by the fact that I'm not acting like a scared slave.

"Would you prefer it if I ignored you altogether?" she asked as she picked up a device that was shaped like a gun, except that the front part of it consisted of a thick, elongated needle and the back end consisted of a removable glass vial. "Most of my test subjects are usually either unconscious or mentally challenged. Sometimes both," she added as an afterthought as she collected a set of glass vials similar to the one attached to the gun before returning to his side. "I rarely get a chance to interact with something as intelligent or fascinating as you. You could say I'm curious to see how someone like you would interact with a superior being if they were to treat you as an equal. Turn over." She prodded him in the side with a finger as she set down the empty vials on a shelf below the table.

"The last time you had me on my stomach, you stuck a mind control device in me and made me attack my friend."

"Don't worry, there will be no mind control devices this time," she promised before giving him another impatient prod in the stomach. "Now turn over. I want to start with a sample of your bone-marrow."
Fai momentarily considered being difficult, but ultimately decided against it. *Being uncooperative isn't going to help me get out of here,* he thought grimly as he turned onto his stomach. Akira powered on some electronic contraption above him. The device hummed as it came to life, its metal arms clicking and whirring just as Fai heard the distinct sound of several holographic screens coming into existence around him. Fai lifted his head to look at the device, but Akira pushed him back onto the table as she wiped the skin around his hipbone with some disinfectant.

"How about we strike a little deal, 224?" Akira said as she leaned over him to reach for something on the other side of the table. "For every question that I answer, you do the same. And don't fidget, because this *will* hurt."

Fai tensed in anticipation as one of the mechanical arms descended towards him, the burning sensation he had come to associate with a laser scalpel assaulting the flesh right on top of his hipbone. Fai gasped, his whole body jerking as he felt the muscles tear and Akira *tsked* in irritation.

"I thought I told you to hold still."

"How the hell do you expect me to stay still when you're burning a hole into my flesh?"

"Don't be so dramatic, 224," Akira chastised as she turned off the scalpel. Fai's accelerated healing kicked in, slowly closing up the cauterized wound. "It was just a small incision so that I could reach your bone. But it appears to me that your healing doesn't make you immune to pain."

"Didn't you already know that from the time you stuck me with that implant?" He turned his head to glare at her.

"I was curious to see if your response had changed."

"You're crazy," he hissed, digging his nails into the palms of his hands as a different mechanical arm descended upon him, plunging a needle into the incision. Immediately, the entire region went numb. The laser scalpel activated for a second time, but Fai barely felt it slice through his skin this time. He did feel it, however, when she stuck a gun-shaped device into his bone.

"The process takes a little over five minutes to complete, so don't move, 224. If you mess with my samples, I'll have to repeat the entire process, and I won't give you anesthetics a second time." A moment passed by in silence before Akira spoke again. "So, are you up for the deal?"

"Who shot me in the grounds?" he asked, gritting his teeth against the uncomfortable sensation of having a piece of his bone removed via needle.

"The first shot was by Director Bia," Akira replied, sounding pleased by the fact that he had agreed to go along with her little experiment. "The second one was by her personal guard, Riza."

"I only got shot once outside," Fai frowned in confusion, momentarily forgetting about his discomfort as he tried to recall getting hit for a third time.

"Riza is a brilliant shot," Akira said. "She's a human, but she has an uncanny skill with guns. By far, she is one of my most successful test subjects for the Neural Implants. She used to be a
Liberalist who infiltrated The Company in an attempt to rescue her Unnatural husband from the Gladiator Program, but she got caught. You're heading for the Gladiator Program, too, once I'm done with you."

"That doesn't explain how I got shot by her."

"Her bullet punched straight through. You healed from that injury before you woke," she explained as she withdrew the needle. Fai felt the numbing sensation recede just as his body began to heal itself. "My turn," Akira said as she detached the glass vial with his bone matter and deposited it on the shelf under the table. She waited until she had attached a second empty vial before gesturing for Fai to turn onto his back.

Fai complied, hissing when the sensitive skin on his back came into contact with the table top.

"Move your arm next to your head," Akira instructed as she wiped at the skin over his chest. "And hold your breath," she added as the mechanical arm descended.

Fai had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from gasping as the needle pierced his chest cavity and injected him with another dose of the numbing serum. Hearing the buzz of the laser-scalpel activating, he closed his eyes. It was one thing to willingly allow Akira to poke and prod him with needles and scalpels, but it was another thing entirely to watch it happen.

"It's amazing how you don't seem to scar at all," Akira said, and Fai focused on the sound of her voice instead of the strange, not-quite-there feeling of his body being sliced open. Her fingers traced his skin just outside of the number area. "I could cut through your chest and you'd probably still heal without any visible scarring." She chuckled when Fai's eyes jerked open in shock at that statement. "I obviously don't have the time or the inclination to do something that extensive right now. Now tell me, how did you get the scars around your eye?"

"Someone tried to rip it out when I was still a human," he whispered, trying to keep his breathing even as she pressed the needle to his chest.

"And you grew it back when you became a Vampirosa?" Akira looked far too excited at that and he wondered if it had been a wise idea to answer her question truthfully. His fears were confirmed the very next second as she cocked her head to one side. "Does this mean I could cut out your eyes without any lasting effects?"

Fai stiffened, trying not to panic at her words.

"You cut out my eyes and I die," he gasped, wincing at the pain in his right lung. Why does she even need a sample from my lungs?

"Relax 224," Akira responded with a roll of her eyes. "I was only speculating. I already told you: I'm not really interested in doing anything extensive today, though I suppose it would certainly be fascinating to watch you regenerate your organs. But I'd rather do that when I have more time on my hands. Ask your question."

Fai waited until Akira removed the needle and moved to deposit the vial before he spoke.

"What will happen in the Gladiator Program? And what do you plan on doing with all these samples you're collecting?"

"That's two questions, 224," Akira pointed out as she swiped at the skin over his stomach. Fai held back a tired groan. How many of these is she going to collect?
"The Gladiator Program is a part of The Company-sanctioned entertainment," she said as the procedure began all over again. "Any Unnatural with exceptional fighting skills or dangerous abilities is placed there. Of course you will have to display your abilities in front of the board of Directors before you're introduced to the public. Director Bia wasn't pleased with the way you helped 147 escape. Not that it matters much for my experiment. I have enough clones available that losing one subject won't cause too many problems with my work. But Director Bia is very unhappy, so your introductory fight is against La Lupa-420."

Akira paused to let Fai comment on the information she had shared, but since he remained silent, she continued.

"420 is a rather vicious Lupine and is the winner of the last three annual events for the tournament," she told him. "I wonder what would happen if you were injected with a strain of the Lupine virus? Would you become a three-way hybrid? Or would you show immunity towards it, like the rest of the Vampirosa? Or a failed transformation might kill you. That would certainly be an interesting process to observe."

"That's two questions, Akira," Fai said, throwing her words back at her. "And I have no idea. I've never met a Lupine in my life."

"I'll be studying the effects of various Cerellium compounds on your tissue samples," Akira said as she deposited the sample and moved to a new location. "I'm curious to see how it all affects your Hybrid physiology. Have you thought about what your offspring might be like?" she said, glancing at him inquisitively as the laser-scalpel activated. "Would they be natural born Hybrids? Or would only one of your genes be dominant? I've successfully created Vampirosa Elemental Hybrids and even Lupine Elemental Hybrids using a parent from each, but when it comes to an Elemental and a Magirius set of parents, it's always the Elemental gene that is dominant, so there's no chance of creating a hybrid between that set. And it's always a fifty-fifty chance of a successful mix between crossbreeds amongst the other three. Given the rarity of your particular hybrid crossbreed, I'm really interested in seeing what would happen if I were to try and further crossbreed you with a female from each of the other class of Unnaturals.

"Too bad the board of directors don't want you in the Breeding Program," she sighed in dejection as she removed the needle and put away the gun to fiddle with the electronic device above him. He didn't think Akira was the sort of woman who would let her superior's orders stop her from getting what she wanted and the thought of letting someone like her use him in one of breeding experiments made him nauseous.

"I can't have kids," Fai blurted out. It was the first thing that came to his mind.

"That's a pity," Akira made a face before turning her attention to what she was doing. "This is the last sample I need," she said as she tapped at one of the holographic screens above him. The electronic device with its mechanical arms whirred as it moved across the roof of the room before lowering towards the table right above his head. Fai's eyes widened in surprise and just a little bit of fear as he made the connection to where she wanted the last sample from. "Alright, 224. One last question and then no more talking, because if you move this time, you can die."

"Do you have to take a sample from my brain? Even if I'm a vampire, I don't think my body is capable of healing brain damage."

"I'm not taking anything that would permanently damage you," Akira said as she tapped the screen for a final time. A compartment in the device hovering above him opened, and a metal brace descended to fit around his skull, holding his head in place as three of the metal arms descended. "This will certainly hurt, but you need to stay still if you don't want to become a permanent test-
subject in my research projects."

"No, wait," he gasped, struggling against the metal brace fitted around his head. "You can't just— gah!" His back arched off the table, every muscle in his body going rigid as something sharp began to drill into his skull, and he screamed. Almost an eternity went by before the drilling stopped and he fell onto the table with an exhausted shudder. Tears of pain streamed down his cheeks as he whimpered, feeling the warm blood dribbling down his scalp. Akira inserted a needle into the crook of his elbow and pressed the plunger on the syringe. An unnatural heaviness settled over his mind, dragging his eyes closed despite the pain. The last thing he heard was the sound of the drill activating for a second time before he was lost in the darkness.

By the time he managed to claw his way back to the living world, Akira was tying a roll of gauze over the hole in his skull.

"There you go, 224, all done," Akira patted him on the head, and Fai groaned at the pounding that accompanied her touch. He swallowed thickly, his tongue feeling like a wad of cotton had been stuffed in his mouth. "Since you were supposed to undergo several invasive procedures, I already acquired permission for you to rest for the night. Your match against 420 isn't until tomorrow afternoon."

"You said you would l-l-let me go if I cooperated," he said as he slowly struggled into an upright position.

"I said I'd let you out of this room," Akira said, and his heart sank. I knew she wouldn't let me leave, he thought bitterly as he watched her type a set of commands into a holographic screen. An uncomfortable tingle spread through his body as the nanites appeared to receive their new instructions.

"There you go, 244. Just like I promised, you're free to leave this room. Just be sure not to wander too far from your handler before he has a chance to explain the new boundary limits to you. We wouldn't want you blowing up before you even had a chance to display your skills, would we now?"

Exhaustion washed over him, and it took everything Fai had not to fall back as he used his hands to support the weight of his suddenly too-tired body. He could feel the wound in his head sluggishly begin to close, but it felt as if that would take a long time to heal.

"Go to h-h-h-hell," he spat weakly, though Akira merely laughed.

"I wonder how long it will take you to notice that," Akira mumbled just as a knock sounded on the door.

"I hope you're done with it by now, Akira," Kyle Rondart said as he strode into the room, looking impatient. "I have some very important work that I need to return to once I've brought 224 to its cell."

"I was just finishing up," Akira said as she gestured towards Fai, who was still seated on the table. Kyle gave him a cursory glance before looking back at Akira.

"Does it need to be fed before I leave it alone?"

"Only if you want it to be ready for the fight tomorrow," Akira replied as she turned her back towards them both. "224 is going to be very unsteady on its feet for a few hours, so you might have
"I'd have brought along a slave for that if I had known you were going to tire it out so much," Kyle grumbled as he crossed the length of the room and clasped his hands around Fai's forearm. Fai stumbled off the table, though the man made no motion to catch him when he nearly fell.

"Good luck with your match, 224. You'll need it," Akira said by the way of farewell as Kyle led him out into the hallway. It was all Fai could do to stagger along as they reached the lifts and began to descend towards the very last floor. The metal doors slid apart at their destination, and Fai felt the nanites hum in his blood for a second time as soon as they crossed the threshold.

"Your movement is restricted to this floor only," Kyle said as he led him through the large room that mirrored the reception hall a few floors above. "The only way out is through the lift behind me, but if you try to get on it without your nanites deactivated, you die. Is that clear, 224?"

Fai said nothing as he focused his energy on putting one step in front of the other while Kyle carelessly guided him through a maze of corridors. He absently made note of all the different rooms and twists and turns, the habit of creating a mental map of the building ingrained in his subconscious, though Fai felt so confused and tired that he hardly processed any of it. All he wanted to do was sleep.

Fai heard a loud hum of voices somewhere nearby at the intersection of one of the corridors. Kyle turned them away from the noise and towards a cool, dark corridor that Fai found oddly soothing. He twisted the knob of a door at the end of the corridor and led him into a tiny room furnished with a single metal framed bed and a chair. Kyle let go of him and Fai stumbled towards the bed, falling down on the flimsy mattress with a tired groan.

"Drink up and get some sleep," Kyle ordered as he withdrew a plastic bag from the pocket of his jacket and threw it on the bed next to Fai. The crimson liquid inside sloshed, a metallic scent briefly assaulting Fai's senses as he reached for the blood bag. "You have a show to put on tomorrow."

The door clicked shut behind Kyle just as Fai brought the bag to his lips and bit into the plastic with his fangs. Cold, slightly stale blood gushed into his mouth, and he could only groan at the way his stomach clenched in anticipation of his first meal in over twenty-four hours.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder if anyone will notice that thing Akira was wondering about Fai to notice near the end. This chapter was fun to write (because when is torturing Fai not fun to write?) though I did have to do quite a lot of research on how biopsies are conducted for the process to be accurate for when Akira did it to Fai. So the stuff that you've read in this chapter with the slicing and the needle inserting and stuff is all accurate (except for how long each process takes, I took liberties with that one but the rest is almost exactly how the doctors do it irl. ;) )

Don't forget to review.
Taking Risks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mokona paced along the length of Yuui's coffee table, pausing only long enough to check the time on the holographic clock above the cabinet in the hallway.

Six thirty-one.

Mokona's ears drooped in disappointment as it glanced out of the window. The sun had dropped lower than the city's skyline, lending the perpetual gunmetal grey clouds an orange hue. Making a tiny, mournful sound in its mouth, Mokona resumed its walk around the table. Two rounds later, Mokona stopped to look back at the holographic clock again.

Six thirty-two.

"Where is Yuui...?" the dimension hopper whimpered, nursing its bandaged paw as it jumped to the floor. The paw throbbed at the impact, but the painkillers Yuui had left behind helped Mokona ignore the pain for the most part. It padded across the room to reach the window before hopping up to the windowsill. Mokona pressed its uninjured paw against the glass, feeling the cold surface hum at its touch, indicating that the security system was still active. "Mokona promised to wait for Yuui to come home, but Mokona needs to find Fai before Fai leaves again."

Tears gathered in its eyes as Mokona stared at tall black and white towers rising above all the other buildings in the distance. That was where Mokona had briefly sensed Fai's magic four hours ago.

"Fai... Please wait for Mokona," Mokona whispered as it turned back to check the time once more.

Six thirty-four.

"Yuui, hurry back," Mokona said as it walked along the length of the windowsill. "Mokona needs to find Mokona's friends."

Six more minutes went by before Mokona heard the lock click open at the front door.

"Yuui! Yuui! Mokona knows where Fai is!" Mokona cried as it hopped off the window and across the living room to reach the entrance. Mokona's paw throbbed in protest of the jarring movements, but Mokona didn't care. Yuui was home. Now Mokona could find its friends. Mokona bounced off the floor to land on Yuui's shoulder as soon as he stepped inside. "Mokona sensed Fai's magic when Yuui was gone. Can Yuui take Mokona to Fai if Mokona tells Yuui where Fai is?"

"Slow down, little friend," Yuui said as he caught Mokona off his shoulder and brought it up to his eye level. Locking the door behind him, Yuui carried Mokona further into the apartment as he headed towards the kitchen. "I just got home. Have you had anything to eat at all today? How about I fix us some food while you tell me where you think your friend might be."

"Mokona is not hungry," Mokona said as Yuui set it down on the countertop. Mokona watched as Yuui turned away to open the icebox and pull out a loaf of bread. "Mokona can eat after Mokona finds Fai. Fai is at the black and white towers, but Mokona doesn't think that Mokona can walk across the city alone. Can Yuui take Mokona to Fai?"

"Are you sure that's where your friend is?" Yuui asked as he turned away to grab a pair of plates.
"Mokona felt Fai use his magic there," Mokona said, watching Yuui prepare two sandwiches even after Mokona had said that it wasn't hungry.

"Are you sure?" Yuui asked again and Mokona felt its worry rise. Even if Yuui's expression betrayed nothing, Mokona could feel his anxiety as a palpable aura that hung around him.

"Mokona is certain. Is something wrong? Yuui sounds worried."

"Well, little friend, I had been hoping my sources were wrong about your friend's location," Yuui said as he pushed one plate in front of Mokona and grabbed the second for himself. "But if you've sensed him there too, then I'm afraid this is very bad news."

"Is Fai in trouble?"

"Trouble won't even begin to describe it, I'm afraid."

"Then we have to save Fai!" Mokona cried as it tried to hop to the floor, only to be caught by Yuui in midair.

"Rushing in there won't help him." Yuui shook his head as he set Mokona back on the counter. "Your friend is inside The Company."

"They're the bad people who tried to hurt Mokona. Are they hurting Fai too?"

"I don't know. All I could find was that he was captured by The Company a couple of weeks ago."

"If Fai is hurt, then Fai won't be able to get out."

"I know," Yuui agreed. "But I don't think you and I will be able to get him out either. Not without some help and a plan."

"Then we have to find Syaoran and Kurogane."

"Can you sense where they might be?" Yuui asked as he picked up his sandwich and took a bite.

"Mokona might if they use magic."

"I thought you said the ninja doesn't have any magic." Yuui frowned.

"Fai sealed Kurogane's sword in his arm with a spell. If Kurogane summons Ginryuu, Mokona can tell where he is."

"I see."

"Did Yuui find anything about Syaoran and Kurogane?"

"I'm sorry," Yuui shook his head before gently petting Mokona. "My contacts don't seem to know anything about them."

Mokona's ears drooped in disappointment.

"Don't worry though, I've asked them to keep an eye out. If they're in the city, we'll find them. Just give it some time."

"But—"
"Worrying isn't going to help anyone, Mokona," Yuui chastised as he picked up Mokona's sandwich and set it in front of the dimension hopper. "You need to focus on getting better, and I'll see if I can figure out a way to get in touch with Fai, all right? Maybe he might have an idea of where your other friends are."

"How can Yuui talk to Fai if Fai is in The Company?"

"I can't, but I have a friend who can," Yuui said as he winked at Mokona before adopting a stern expression. "Now eat."

Mokona felt like there was something Yuui wasn't saying, but Mokona couldn't think of a reason for the blond to hide anything. Not when he had promised to help Mokona find its friends. Pushing the worry aside, Mokona decided to trust Yuui. Yuui was Fai's brother, and Fai was a nice person. That meant that Yuui was a nice person too.

-0-

Syaoran stared at the steaming bowl of soup in his hands, watching the pieces of vegetables and chunks of some type of meat shift when he swirled it with a spoon. I wonder what it's called, he thought idly.

"Is something wrong with your dinner?" Meiling asked, drawing Syaoran's attention from his musings. Syaoran looked up to see her frowning at him.

"I'm sorry, what?" he asked.

"I asked if the food was okay," she said just as Syaoran cast a distracted glance around the crowded dining hall. The Scavengers were all milling about, meeting up with their friends and getting food. Many of the Scavengers who couldn't cook or who didn't have proper kitchens in their homes came here. He'd gotten acquainted with a few members of the group, though he didn't see anyone he knew and no one else bothered to come to their table in the corner of the hall.

"I could go and grab you a blood bag if you wanted that instead," Meiling suggested when he failed to respond.

"No, no, the food is good." He shook his head.

Meiling was letting him stay at her apartment and she was kind enough to pay for his expenses while Touya decided where to put him. He didn't want the money Meiling had spent on his soup to go to waste. Plus, he still hadn't gotten over his distaste for blood. Quickly filling the spoon with some broth, Syaoran brought it to his lips. He gulped it down, hissing at the way it burnt the insides of his mouth. Water gathered in his eyes as he made a face and Meiling giggled.

"You're the first vampire I've met that actually dislikes blood." She gave him an amused smile, taking her time to take a sip from the bowl of soup sitting in front of her.

"Sorry," he blurted, feeling heat rise to the tips of his ears.

"What for?"

"Umm..." Syaoran struggled and failed to come up with a reason for his apology. The word had just tumbled past his lips without any prompting, and even though he couldn't figure out why he had apologized, a part of him felt it was right to do so. Realizing that Meiling was still waiting for an answer, he shook his head. "I don't know."
"You're weird," Meiling chuckled as she reached across the table to grab a slice of flatbread. "Just be more careful with yourself in the future. Touya will have my head if he hears that I let you get hurt on my watch. Just so you know, that's not the only reason I said that, though." She paused to give him a meaningful look. "I mean, you're an interesting guy, and I'd rather you didn't get hurt at all, but if that's not enough of a reason, Touya and my impending doom should be a good motivating factor, right?" she finished with a flirtatious wink and Syaoran felt the heat rise up his neck for an entirely different reason.

He immediately dropped his gaze to his dinner, pretending not to hear Meiling's giggles.

"Lantis, hey, over here!" she yelled only a minute later as she jumped to her feet. Syaoran looked up to see the man walking away on the other side of the hall, as if he hadn't heard Meiling. "Great, he's going to pretend he can't hear me." She groaned as she turned to Syaoran in apology. "Do you mind if I go talk to him? I asked him to get me a new digi-reader last week, and he's been trying to get out of seeing me about it. It's one of the latest models and it has all these awesome features that my old one doesn't. I'd be able to link with the Central Cavahall Network, so I can get you some translated books to read as well."

"Sure."

"Thanks! I'll be right back, okay?"

Syaoran watched the girl as she darted around the table to chase after Lantis. She caught up to him near the exit, punching him on the arm as she berated him for avoiding her. Syaoran could have easily eavesdropped on the conversation with his enhanced hearing, but it didn't feel like the right thing to do. His thoughts once again wandered back to what sort of person he could have been before his capture. Had he always been so respectful of other people's right to privacy? Or was that trait limited to the people he considered friends?

Is it always going to be like this for me? He wondered as he absently swirled his spoon in the soup. Every time I do something, all I can think about is if the old me would have done the same.

Despite his concerns about his old self, Syaoran was learning to cope with the lack of memories to some extent. It had been several days since he had accepted Touya's offer to become a part of the Scavengers, and while it didn't feel like he belonged there, Touya and his friends were doing their best to help him adjust. Emeraude still acted distant towards him, but Syaoran still wasn't certain why she was upset that he knew Touya in a past he didn't remember. Just like his missing memories, Syaoran tried not to let Emeraude's behavior bother him.

Instead, he focused his attention towards learning what he could about himself without risking insanity. In the days he'd spent with the Scavengers, Syaoran had discovered that he was a newly transformed hybrid, and that he preferred normal food to blood for sustenance. And he really enjoyed to read, though for some reason, he couldn't understand the native script of Cavahall.

Meiling had commented on how strange it was for someone who had spent a long time in Cavahall to not have learned the language. But then, none of them knew about the conditions he'd been living under prior to his capture. Adding to that the fact that he could read a few foreign languages, Meiling had declared that he must have moved to Cavahall from some place beyond the wastelands. Even if it was extremely rare, it wasn't unheard of.

Syaoran wondered what sort of places he might have visited before coming to Cavahall. Maybe he had traveled with his sisters. It was frustrating that he couldn't even remember their names. Apparently, when he had met Touya, he hadn't talked about them except letting the man know that they were already dead. Not for the first time Syaoran wished the old Syaoran had at least bothered
to tell Touya their names. Even if felt strange to think of himself having siblings, it would have been better to put names to featureless phantoms that sometimes appeared in his mind.

"Something tells me you're not very hungry tonight," Meiling said as she dropped back down at the table next to him.

Syaoran looked up from his now-cold-and-unappetizing dinner to see that the dining hall had nearly cleared out.

"Syaoran, are you okay? You looked troubled," Meiling said, touching his arm when he failed to respond. Her fingers felt freezing against his skin, but she had gotten used to his elevated body temperature. Emeraude had explained his fever as a side effect of whatever it was that was wrong with him. They still hadn't been able to determine a probable cause for his sickness beyond the fact that his memories triggered his fits of insanity. If Emeraude can't figure out what's wrong with me, I might never know who I am.

"Syaoran?" Meiling sounded worried now. "Do you want me to get Emeraude?"

"I'm fine." He shook his head, pushing away from the table as he got to his feet. Noting the plastic device tucked under her arm, he continued speaking in hopes of distracting her. "Did you get that from Lantis?"

"Yeah," she said, grinning as she held out the digi-reader for him to see. "The jerk finally managed to get his hands on one. Turns out he was avoiding me because he couldn't get in touch with Yuui."

"Yuui?" Syaoran asked as he turned the device in his hands, wondering where its power switch was located.

"He's the super-sexy dealer that we get most of our gadgets from," Meiling replied, tapping the top of the device to turn it on. "Unfortunately, Yuui is a little too old for me, but he's quite the eye candy."

"Meiling, that's..." He trailed off, taken aback by the way she tended to discuss men even with people she barely knew.

"Don't worry, Syaoran, you still have my heart." She winked again as the device chimed in Syaoran's hand, indicating that it had turned on. "Oh, Lantis said he's downloaded some volumes that he thought you might enjoy," she added, not giving him a chance to respond as she sidled up to him. She chattered away as she flicked her fingers over the screen and a holographic menu popped above its surface.

Meiling brought up the aforementioned volumes for Syaoran but his attention was drawn to the way he could feel her bare arm brushing against his. Due to the strange circumstances surrounding his amnesia, Syaoran could not recall the purpose and function of a lot of the technology being used around the Scavengers' base, but Meiling loved explaining it to him. It was hard not to notice the excited gleam in her crimson eyes whenever she spoke about the technology in Cavahall. And it was harder still not to notice how pretty she looked when she smiled at him. Yet despite the fact that Meiling had made no secret of her attraction for him, and despite the fact that she was smart, funny and intelligent as well as pretty, Syaoran found that he couldn't return her feelings. He liked her well enough but...

He turned his head to take a closer look at the girl beside him. Her dark hair was pulled up in a lazy bun at the back of her head, several strands escaping from the hair tie to brush against her tanned skin of her neck.
She's not—a sad voice whispered somewhere in the back of his mind as a pair of green eyes flashed across his vision, followed by the sound of tinkling laughter. Syaoran closed his eyes, trying to put a face to go with that laughter only to flinch when the bells began to toll. Gritting his teeth, Syaoran let go of what he hoped was a memory, trying not to feel bitter about not remembering who it was. I'm getting tired of this…

"Syaoran, are you sure nothing is wrong?" Meiling said, frowning as she leaned towards him, stopping inches away to peer at his face. Her cold fingers wrapped around his hand as she gave him a worried look. "You look pale. Maybe we should go see Emeraude after all."

"No," Syaoran his head, slipping out of her grasp as he took a step back. Hurt flashed across Meiling's eyes and Syaoran felt a pang of guilt. "I'm okay. I'm just a little tired."

"Okay," Meiling murmured, turning away from him. "Let's go home."

Syaoran knew it would be rude to point out that the apartment they shared was home to only one of them. So he silently followed as Meiling stepped outside and began leading the way down the cobblestone road.

The walk to their apartment only took five minutes, but Meiling didn't once try to initiate a conversation with him, not even to ask for the digi-reader that Syaoran still held in his clammy hands. Meiling rarely missed an opportunity to talk to him, so her continued silence only intensified his guilt. Punctuated only by the sound of their footsteps, the silence stretched out between them, awkward and stifling, and Syaoran wished he could figure out a way to make it up to her.

Unaware of the thoughts racing through his head, Meiling unlocked the door and stepped inside. Syaoran watched her back as she headed straight for her room, not even turning to tell him goodnight. Hope flared inside his chest when she paused outside her door, her hand resting against the frame as she spoke.

"Don't forget to take your meds," she reminded him.

He tried not to panic when she started to leave without saying anything else. In the few days that he had known her, Meiling had become a very good friend. She had been doing her best to help him adjust, going out of her way to help him understand the strange world around him, and all Syaoran had done was reject her. And for who? A phantom from a past I don't remember. For all I know, the green-eyed girl is someone I saw in The Company, or maybe someone I knew before I moved to Cavahall. Or she could be just a figment of my imagination. She might not even be real.

"Meiling, wait," he called as he flashed behind her, catching her arm before she could open the door. She stiffened at his touch, still refusing to face him, but Syaoran tried not to let that discourage him. "About earlier...When I moved away from you, I... I didn't do it to reject you. I was just..." He trailed off, struggling to find a way to phrase his feelings.

"You were just...?" Meiling repeated, turning towards him with a guarded expression, but Syaoran was able to pick up on the hope that underlay her tone.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," Syaoran said, scratching the back of his neck. "Here's your digi-reader. You were quite excited about this earlier."

"Thanks," Meiling mumbled as she accepted the device Syaoran held out for her.

He had hoped the assurance that he hadn't done it to hurt her feelings would have been enough to make her feel better, but the earlier excitement did not return to Meiling's face.
I've done something wrong, he thought, his mind furiously working to think of some way to make her smile again.

"Also," he blurted, stopping her from turning away as his body moved of its own accord. He stepped closer to brush his lips against her cheek before moving away, offering her a shy smile as he continued. "Thank you, for helping me."

Meiling looked startled by the suddenness of his gesture, but it only took a fraction of a second for her expression to change.

"Don't mention it, you idiot," she giggled, and Syaoran was relieved to see that he had succeeded in making her smile.

The green eyes flashed across his vision once more as a girl called his name. Who are you? He questioned the fleeting ghost, his earlier frustration returning when the tolling bells forced him to let go of the memory. He flinched at how loud they got before he succeeded in pushing them away.

"Syaoran, maybe you should go to bed now," Meiling suggested, once again looking worried.

"Might be a good idea." Syaoran nodded as he moved away.

"I'll see you in the morning," she said. "Get some rest. And don't forget your meds, all right?"

"Goodnight, Meiling." Syaoran waved at her before hurrying towards the comfort of his room. He didn't bother turning on the lights as the door swung shut behind him. Giving his eyes a moment to adjust to the dull moonlight filtering into the room through a tiny window, Syaoran made his way towards the bed. He sat down on its edge with a tired groan, rubbing his temples as he felt the beginnings of a headache forming.

He glanced at the glass bottle resting on the bedside table. The silver capsules containing the memory suppressants shimmered in the moonlight as he reached to pick it up. Despite the fact that it made the pounding in his head intensify, Syaoran thought back to the green-eyed phantom from his suppressed memories. He stared down at the bottle in his hand without really looking at it as his brows furrowed in thought.

Whatever happened to me in The Company is what makes me go insane... Maybe, if I'm really careful about what I want to remember, there isn't any harm in finding who she is. Syaoran put the bottle back on the table before pulling off his shoes.

They want me to keep taking the medication until Emeraude can figure out how to fix me, but... I'm tired of not remembering. I want to know who I am. And... it won't be fair to Meiling if the old me already had someone in the city.

Nodding to himself, Syaoran lay down on his back to stare at the cracked paint in the ceiling above his head.

I need to know who I am, he thought, closing his eyes as he let sleep take him.

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Syaoran was surprised to see a bright and sunny blue sky above his head. He had never seen such a clear sky in Cavahall before but its appearance felt comfortable. Warm sand brushed against his bare toes and Syaoran looked down to realize he was wearing open-toed sandals.

His surroundings slowly began to shift till the sky overhead was replaced by what appeared to be the roof of a temple. The ceiling had large openings at regular intervals, no doubt created by the architects to let in ample sunlight. Huge stone pillars with intricate carvings supported the roof.
and Syaoran walked to the nearest one, intrigued by the familiarity of the hieroglyphics etched into
the stone. Beyond the pillar, he could see the desert spreading out in every direction, the horizon
interrupted only by twin wing-shaped structures that he could see in the distance.

I’ve been here before, he thought as he looked around, making note of everything inside the temple
that appeared to stand out to him. This is the…a temple that I used to come to with—

"Oh, thank goodness. I was worried I’d never be able to find the right dream," said a sweet,
feminine voice from somewhere behind him. Syaoran whirled around, his eyes going wide in shock
at the person who stood before him.

His breath caught in his throat as he took in the auburn hair that framed her sweet, smiling face.
Her mouth was pulled up in a brilliant smile as she watched him with glittering emerald eyes. She
wore a flowing, pale pink dress that fluttered around her tanned legs in an invisible breeze, though
Syaoran’s attention was drawn back to her face as she tilted her head to give him a teasing smile.

"I thought you might be surprised to see me here, but you look like you’ve seen a ghost, Syaoran," the girl said.

She knows who I am, he thought, his brows furrowing as he tried to remember where he knew her
from. Is she someone important to me?

The air rang with the sharp toll of a bell, making the girl jump in surprise, though she turned back
to him with a small pout, taking a moment to throw an irritated glare towards the giant metal bell
attached to the roof above their heads.

This wasn’t here before, Syaoran though, resisting the urge to frown as he looked back at the
pouting girl.

"Shouldn't the bells be back at Clow Castle, Syaoran?" the girl asked, oblivious to the thoughts
racing through Syaoran’s mind as she approached him. The bell tolled again, but they both
managed to ignore it. She giggled and Syaoran realized that he really liked the sound of her
tinkling laugh. "Looks like we will have to put up with Onii-san’s warning bells even in the dream
world."

"You're real..." he breathed, slowly walking across the temple towards her, stopping only when he
was a foot, he reached towards the girl, a part of him afraid that she would vanish the moment his
fingers touched her, but much to his relief, she remained solid, even as his hand brushed a tendril
of stray hair from her face. For some reason, he could recall having done it thousands of times
before. "I know you... don't I?"

Chapter End Notes

And they finally meet. Anyone wants to guess what might happen to Syaoran next? I
don’t really have much to say this time except for usual thing about dropping me a
review with your thoughts. I really am interested in finding out what you guys think
about the plot and the way the story is progressing so please do let me know. Feel free
to ask me any questions in case something seems unclear or if you think something
doesn't make sense.
Fai woke to the feeling of dozens of hammers slamming into his skull. Biting back a groan, he pushed his body into an upright position, grimacing as the blood-encrusted sheets pulled free from his skin. Glancing down at his hand, he noticed he was still clutching the empty blood bag he’d fed from the previous night. Making a face, he dropped it on the bed before reaching up with the same hand to prod at the bandages wound around his head.

The hole Akira had drilled into his skull had healed while he’d slept, though the area was tender to the touch. Still, the bandages made his skin itch, so Fai hooked his fingers under the gauze and pulled it off. He hissed in irritation when he pulled out a few hairs along with the bloodied bandages. Massaging the tender spot, Fai stood, taking in his surroundings. The room was small, furnished only with a flimsy bed and a chair. A light was fixed to the roof and a small vent in the wall pumped in stale, recycled air.

Fai rubbed a hand over his mouth, noting with some distaste that there was dried blood around his lips when rust-colored flakes fell to the floor. I fed like a barbarian last night, he thought, tugging at the knots in his hair as he searched the walls for surveillance cameras. Much to his surprise, he found none. Why aren't they worried I might try another escape?

"The only way out is through the lift behind me, but if you try to get on it without a modified code in your nanites, you die." Kyle's words from the previous night rang inside his head, and Fai sighed as he slumped in the chair. Closing his eyes, he rested his head against the wall, feeling it throb in sync with his heartbeat, but the cold cement provided him some relief.

Cracking an eye open, Fai glanced towards the door, wondering if Kyle had locked it on his way out. He'd been out of it when Kyle had brought him down here last night, but seeing as no one had bothered to make him wear another Cerellium collar, his captors must have been confident that he wouldn't try escaping again.

I need to find a way to turn off the nanites, he decided as he stood up, slowly approaching the door. Or it won't matter that I have found a way to use magic despite the Cerellium compounds. He reached for the doorknob, hesitating only for a moment before wrapping his fingers around the handle. It twisted open without any resistance, and the door swung inwards with a soft creak.

They didn't even lock me in? He frowned, taking a step out into the hallway. Looking both ways, he noticed that it was completely empty. He stood out in the open as he tried to recall which direction Kyle had led him, then turned right and headed down the corridor. He had to stop and recall his mental map several times, but he didn't encounter anyone else on his way to the elevator despite the fact that it nearly took him half an hour to navigate the labyrinthine corridors. He recalled hearing other people on this floor last night, but apparently, he was the only one awake at this hour.

The glass doors of the elevator slid open in invitation when Fai was still four feet away, and he cast another wary glance around him. The expansive lobby was still completely empty, though Fai did spot several security cameras installed all along the walls. His hands became fists by his side, and Fai glared at the parted doors.

What if the explosive nanites were just a lie? A tiny voice whispered in the back of his mind. For all I know, this could be another one of Akira's tests.
Fai raised his head to stare at the camera installed directly above the lift. Was she there on the other side? Watching him stand indecisively in front of the double doors? It took him only a fraction of a second to make his decision as he crossed the short distance and stepped into the elevator. The keypad attached to one of the walls had the same kind of genetic lock that Fai had spotted in the rooms used for the Pleasure Program.

Before Fai could think of a way to make the keypad work for him however, his blood gave an unpleasant tingle, and Fai felt his body temperature begin to rise. His eyes widened in surprise as sweat dotted his brow, his breath speeding up as he reached the conclusion that the nanites had activated.

"Not a l-l-l-lie…" he gasped, calling on his vampire speed to dart into the lobby. His bloodstream hummed as his body temperature began to drop. Fai turned to glare at a security camera, though his heart still thundered inside his chest, adrenaline pumping through his veins from his brush with death.

"Damn," he heard a man whistle from somewhere behind him and Fai turned around to face a dark-haired man. "You look like shit, man," the man said as he approached. Fai resisted the urge to frown. The man seemed to be making note of all the places dried blood still clung to Fai's skin. "You didn't try auditioning for The Walking Dead, did you? Because that looks more like Akira went all 'crazy doctor' on you."

The man spoke with a familiarity that only came from being good friends, though Fai couldn't remember ever having come across this man.

"I had no idea you were one of us, Yuui…"

"I'm sorry?" Fai had to struggle to keep the panic from showing on his face. How does he know my name?

"When did you get turned into a Vampirosa, man?" the man asked, peering at him closely. "Akira must have really done a number on you. You look like you don't even know me anymore."

"Sorry," Fai muttered, wondering how to handle the situation. This man obviously knew Cavahall's version of Yuui, who was most certainly dead, given the fact that Fai was there now. So how should Fai react? Pretend to be the person this man knew or tell the truth? Or whatever parts of the truth that he could without sounding crazy.

"What's wrong?" the man asked, his gaze trailing down to the words tattooed to Fai's collarbone. His eyes went wide as he gaped at the tattoo before looking back up at Fai. "You're a Hybrid… What— but... you were a human six months ago!"

Guess I can't pretend to be Yuui then...

"I think you are confusing me with someone else."

"What do you mean I'm confusing you with someone else? You're Yuui, aren't you?"

"My name is Fai," Fai replied with a small shake of his head.

"Are you a clone?"

"No." Fai feigned confusion, deciding that it was his best shot of dealing with the situation. "Why would you think that?"
"Because you look exactly like Yuui."

"I'm afraid I don't know anyone by that name," he said with another shake of his head before tilting it to one side as he considered the man before him. "Shouldn't you be introducing yourself as well?"

"I'm Roy," the man said, holding out his hand for a shake, "but call me Pyro when the handlers are around. They don't approve of our kind using our real names. What about you?"

"I don't h-h-h-have any other names yet, unless the number counts, in which case, call me 224," Fai said as he shook Roy's hand. He wasn't sure why Roy looked surprised at his words, but the man recovered almost immediately as he smiled.

"You're a newbie here, aren't you?" Roy asked. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you were in the Pleasure Program before. How long ago did you get caught?"

"A few weeks, I think," Fai said, trying to recall the exact number of days he had spent in captivity. "I'm not sure."

"You got tattooed in just a few weeks?" Roy didn't bother hiding his surprise this time. "I was under the impression that training took months to complete. Yamura always complained that that bunch was the hardest to de-brainwash."

"I was a special case," Fai made a face as he thought back to some of the things Naba had said about him. "Wh-wh-who is Yamura?"

"She's an Elemental and a member of the Liberalists." Roy glanced up at the security camera for a moment before smiling at Fai. "But who would want to talk about a grumpy old woman that gets her kicks out of jumping into other people's minds? You still look like an escaped zombie. How about I show you where the showers are?"

"That might be a good idea," he agreed.

"So tell me," Roy said as he began to lead the way towards the corridors, "did your handler tell you about the inner workings of this esteemed program?"

"Except for the fact that I'm to fight against someone called L-La L-Lupa this afternoon, not much," Fai replied as he began making notes of the turns Roy took.

"You must have done something really big for her to be your first match," Roy whistled.

"What do you mean?"

"La Lupa is the reigning bloodbath champion for the last three years," Roy told him. "If they're pitting you against her, then there are only two things that the directors could be thinking of."

"Which would be?"

"Well, depending on what you did— wait, what did you do?" Roy stopped walking to fully face Fai, giving him a calculating look.

"I tried to escape," Fai replied in a neutral tone, studying the man to gauge his reaction.

"Really? How far did you make it?"

"To the perimeter of the grounds, but someone shot me before I could get away," he said and Roy's
"You made it all the way across the grounds without getting caught?" Roy started to move once again and Fai followed right after. "So that means you've got skills, but…"

"But what?"

"I think the directors are pitting you against La Lupa in the hopes that you won't survive the fight.”

Kurogane glared at the Nixon, yanking at the reinforced Cerellium chains that bound him to the wall of his dank cell.

"Even Lupines can't break through those chains," Nixon told him as he crossed his arms, leaning against the wall opposite to Kurogane, well out of reach. There was a hint of a smile in his tone, as if Kurogane's struggles amused him, which only served to fuel Kurogane's anger.

"Why the fuck are you here?" he growled, not giving up on his attempts to break free even though the metal dug into the tender skin of his wrist.

"I have to admit, you're not the Steel I knew, but you certainly have his temper," Nixon said, subconsciously reaching up to massage his bruised throat. Kurogane eyed the purple marks on his flesh, giving him a feral grin as he recalled the look on the blind idiot's face when Kurogane had nearly snapped his skinny neck in half. "Really though, there's no need to look so proud of yourself. Do you even realize how much trouble you're in with the stunt you pulled back there?"

"I told you I'd kill you if something happened to the kid."

"Yeah, but why the hell would you try to strangle me when your friend died before we even met you?" Nixon scowled. "It's not like I personally staked him through the heart or something."

"Why are you here?" Kurogane scowled back, not willing to admit that the idiot's words made sense. It wasn't the Liberalists' fault that the kid was dead. Hell, if it wasn't for them, Kurogane would be dead himself. But saving his life didn't justify holding him captive against his will.

"Hey, I'd appreciate it if you acted a little more considerately towards your savior. Tommy was ready to shoot your brains out, and Masooma was in line right behind her. I know people usually love shooting the messenger and all, but attacking me last night was completely uncalled for. And even though you nearly killed me, I still convinced them not to kill you."

"If you're here to fish for an apology, you're not going to get one." Kurogane grunted as he turned his back towards the idiot, focusing his attention on breaking the chain instead.

"You're a dick, you know that?" Nixon grumbled in irritation.

Kurogane ignored him as he wrapped the chain around his forearm. Grabbing the links near the base that was drilled into the stone, Kurogane put his foot against the wall for better leverage as he tried to pull it free.

"I did mention that even Lupines can't break free from those chains, didn't I?"

Kurogane continued to pretend he couldn't hear the idiot.

"Honestly, you're only going to succeed in ripping off your remaining arm if you keep this up."
Kurogane said nothing.

"I could try and convince Tommy to let you go," Nixon said tentatively.

Kurogane paused in his struggles, his spine rigid as he kept his back turned to the man. "Why?" he asked, not even bothering to mask the suspicion in his voice.

"Because I'm a nice guy?"

"Bullshit," Kurogane growled as he turned around to glare at him. "I tried to kill you. It's why Tomoyo and your girlfriend locked me in here. Why would you want to help me?"

"Don't see anyone else trying to help you." Nixon made a show of looking around the empty cell before fixing his blank eyes on Kurogane. Quirking a brow, he leaned back against the wall. "Are you really going to question my reasons for getting you out of here?"

Kurogane kept glaring, unable to determine the motivation behind such an offer.

"Look." Nixon sighed heavily as he pushed away from the wall to approach Kurogane, stopping just a foot out of his reach. "I'm not doing this to get you killed, if that's what you're worried about. If I wanted you dead, I wouldn't have stopped Tomoyo from shooting you last night. I'm actually the reason you're not six feet under."

"What's in it for you?"

"If I tell you, will you say yes?"

"Depends."

"I have a plan," Nixon replied, grinning in excitement at the prospect of sharing his idea with someone. "It's this little pet project of mine that I've been working on for a while now. Tommy knows about some of it, but I wanted to get it done before showing her the end result."

"Are you getting somewhere with this?"

"I am, I am. Be patient. I'm figuring this out as I go."

"I thought you said you had a plan."

"I do. It's just not fully formed yet," Nixon admitted as his smile turned sheepish. "I got the idea when I found out that your other friend is being placed in the Gladiator Program, actually. I took a look at the surveillance footage of his attempted escape. He's quite an impressive fighter, by the way. And a very powerful Magirius from the looks of things. Did you know he teleported his little Unnatural friend here while still wearing a Cerellium shackle? And according to the report Akira wrote up on him, he had at least one bullet in his system, too. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't have had any trouble coming along with 147 if he didn't have the Cerellium restricting him."

"Get to the point already," Kurogane grunted irritably. He rambles more than the mage.

"Because of the nature of the GP, Gladiators are normally kept under control via use of range limiters, since they need to access their powers during the televised matches. Each range limiter is armed with an explosive programmed to go off as soon as an Unnatural gets out of a certain range of the limiter beacons. It's a much more complicated process than that, actually, but I'm simplifying it for your sake. If your magician friend is being placed in the GP, it means he'll be injected with the limiter nanites as well."
"So you're saying he'll blow up as soon as he gets out of a certain range? I don't see why you sound so happy about that."

"I've been working on a system to disable the range limiters so we have a shot at getting him out of there," Nixon told him confidently before scratching the back of his head. "Although… there is one little problem."

"What?"

"The deactivator nanites have a very limited range. I've been trying to improve that, but so far the best I can get out of them is a radius of five feet."

"And how do I come into any of this?" Kurogane asked.

"Well... I still have to discuss this with Tommy and get her approval, but I was thinking that maybe we could enter you into the program-undercover, of course. You shouldn't have any trouble fending for yourself, since we've already seen that you can fight, and Masooma told me that the Elemental girl that your friend sent here can heal injuries with her touch, so she can take care of your injuries before you enter the program."

"As good as that plan sounds, I'm not an Unnatural," Kurogane pointed out.

"I know," Nixon said, giving him a look that was surprisingly reminiscent of the mage whenever the idiot thought he had a clever plan. "But you could become one."

Chapter End Notes

Fai has made a new friend and Nixon wants to help Kurogane break out Fai. Anyone care to take a guess about what sort of Unnatural Kurogane might become? Do you think he would agree to go along with Nixon's plan or will he try to figure out some other way to help Fai?

P.S. In case you are wondering, the problems in Fai's speech patterns are linked to what Akira did to him but whether if that's the only side effect remains to be seen.*cackling ensues*
Souma silently watched the proceedings from the corner of the office. She crossed her arms, using the shadows to hide herself, though she knew that the current occupants of the room were both aware of her presence. Emeraude sat right at the edge of a straight-backed chair with her hands clasped in her lap. Across from her, on the other side of a polished wooden desk, Touya calmly leaned back in his chair, balancing the seat on its hind legs as he read through a file. The only source of light in the room was a pair of lamps, one on the table and the other in the corner opposite to Souma, casting long shadows on the walls. The clock ticked steadily as Touya flipped a page.

Emeraude shifted uneasily in her chair, clearing her throat as she glanced in Souma's direction for a fraction of a second. Touya pretended to ignore her as he flipped another page, and Emeraude's jaw hardened as she looked down at her hands. Souma resisted the urge shake her head at Touya's behavior. She doubted he was even aware of the fact that he was copying Director Bia's intimidation techniques, though even if he was, he probably wouldn't care, despite how much he hated that bitch. When Emeraude shifted for a second time, Touya paused in his perusal of the report to glance up. His face was impassive, but Souma could see a cruel amusement dancing in his eyes. The bastard always did enjoy making his underlings squirm.

"You wanted to see me?" Emeraude said, her voice steady despite her tense posture.

"I did," Touya agreed before returning his attention to the report.

Souma rolled her eyes at his behavior, but chose not to say anything. She knew he would pout all day if she told him off for having some 'fun'.

*He can act like such a brat at times,* Souma bit the inside of her cheek to hold back an exasperated smile as she watched him continue ignoring Emeraude. *I really need to speak to him about the way he treats her. He shouldn't have double standards when it comes to dealing with me compared to everyone else.*

Emeraude was a dedicated medic and did her job to the best of her abilities. She was old and powerful, but she acknowledged Touya's leadership of the Scavengers. Apart from the occasional visits that they had arranged for with the Liberalist's healer, Masooma, Emeraude was solely responsible for taking care of the injured and the sick inside the compound. Touya really had to learn to show her a little more gratitude.

Emeraude's expression hardened, but she said nothing as she waited for Touya to finish. Five minutes later, Touya snapped the file shut and dropped it on the table. The forelegs of the chair hit the floor with a sharp *clack* as he let it fall back into its proper position. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on either side of the file as he steepled his fingers and studied Emeraude. Emeraude stared back in stony silence, making Touya frown. Souma bit back an exasperated sigh.

*If he keeps behaving like this, the idiot is going to get himself killed. Or slaughter half the Scavengers.*

"You told me your treatment would keep the hybrid from having a relapse," he finally said.
"I did." Emeraude nodded, using Touya's earlier trick against him as she waited for him to continue.

"Then explain to me how exactly the boy reverted back to insanity this morning?" Touya's voice carried a touch of a growl, and Souma felt a thrill race down her spine. That voice was dangerous, carrying with it the promise of raw, primal power. "I was informed that he nearly ripped Eagle's head off when Meiling called for help."

Souma watched them both closely. Touya had bared his sharp teeth, and Emeraude's claws had elongated. Souma knew it was an involuntary reaction to Touya's display because Emeraude, despite her age and power, would never openly challenge him for leadership, which was probably why she kept her hands concealed from Touya's view.

"What use will I have of the hybrid if I can't even be certain he won't start attacking my men?" he growled. Touya prided himself in his ability to maintain control over his bestial side. For that control to suddenly slip so much that he actually *growled* meant that Touya was a lot more upset by the development than he had let on.

"Syaoran possesses an exceptionally strong will," Emeraude explained in a subdued tone. "Despite my best efforts to keep his memories sealed, he somehow manages to make a connection. And that connection triggers his insanity."

"So you're telling me that the hybrid is useless?"

"I'm telling you that unless we completely extract the memories that act as a trigger, there is no way for him to recover."

"So there is still a chance for him?"

"Yes."

"Then why haven't you pulled those memories out yet?"

"You don't understand." Emeraude shook her head. "I have no way of knowing how the extraction might affect him. Or even if it will be successful at all. It's a risky procedure."

"Can it or can it not fix his brain?"

"If it succeeds, there is a chance that—"

"Do it," Touya cut in as he leaned back in his chair.

"Extracting memories is not child's procedure. It can cause irreversible damage to the memory centers of his brain. We have no idea how those memories might have shaped him into the person he is today. If we take those away, we might even destroy the person we know as Syaoran."

"But it will keep him from ripping the heads off of my men when confronted by something from his past," Touya snapped.

"Yes."

"Then do it."

"After all that I have told you, you still want me to—"

"Was I unclear in my orders, Emeraude?"
"No."

"Good, then see to it that they are obeyed. That will be all."

"Yes." Emeraude gave him a stiff nod as she stood up. "The process will require the presence of a mage. Kindly arrange for healer Masooma to visit us."

"Souma will see to it that she is here by tomorrow afternoon. You may go."

Souma waited until Emeraude's footsteps had retreated before stepping out of the shadows. Touya's stern front melted as soon as he saw her, the corners of his mouth pulling up in a tired smile as he slumped further into his chair. Souma struggled to keep her frown in place as she tried to wordlessly convey her disapproval of his actions. While she never questioned his authority in public, she didn't hesitate to make her opinions known while they were alone.

"You're wearing that look again." Touya grinned boyishly as he rolled his head before stretching his arms to pop a few joints.

"What look?"

"The look that tells me I'm in trouble," he said, continuing to smile and Souma almost returned it before she remembered that she had to talk to him about his behavior.

"You should really be nicer to her," Souma chastised him.

Touya's smile slipped off his face as he looked away, and Souma felt a little guilty for getting on his case about Emeraude. She, of all people, knew the lengths Touya went to to keep the Scavengers safe. Souma eyed the file Touya had pretended to be engrossed in when Emeraude had first arrived. The file contained a report of that month's Cerellium production and sales as well as the 'request order' placed by Director Bia for the coming month's output. Souma knew that Touya was under pressure, but that didn't excuse the way he had acted taken out his frustrations on Emeraude. Still, Souma couldn't ignore the tired slump of his shoulders.

"Emeraude does a brilliant job of taking care of us," Souma said as she came to stand behind Touya, slipping her hands under the collar of his shirt. Working her fingers into the stiff muscles along his shoulder blades, she continued. "Show her a little appreciation, won't you?"

"I can't help it, Souma. Her stuck-up, holier-than-thou attitude always gets on my nerves," Touya groaned as Souma dug her fingers into a knot of muscles, "but there is something else I can be very appreciative of."

Souma smiled privately as he sighed and leaned into her touch.

"I'm being serious, Touya." She had to work to keep her voice hard. "You shouldn't treat Emeraude like she's one of The Company's slaves. She's a pureblood, and an old one at that. All the vampires in our compound revere her. If you don't start giving her the respect she is due, we might soon be dealing with a revolt on top of everything else."

"She wouldn't dare lead a revolt against me." Touya's growl was hardly recognizable as human as he made to get up, but Souma firmly pressed him back into the chair.

"Of course she wouldn't," she said as she walked around the chair. Grabbing hold of the hair at the base of his neck, she sat down in his lap with a small smirk. Leaning down, she pressed her lips against the corner of his mouth, pulling away before he could turn it into a proper kiss. "Just because Emeraude wouldn't do that doesn't mean that none of the other vampires would stand up
against you. They revere her, Touya. And they don't like the way you treat her."

"Well, screw them," Touya shot back as he reached up and pulled her in for a bruising kiss. His lips moved against her mouth, unrelenting in their assault as he parted them to run his tongue along her lower lip. Growling low in his throat, Touya slipped a hand under her shirt, using the other to pull her closer, and Souma nearly forgot what she'd been trying to say to him. She realized too late that Touya had turned her trick against her as he deepened the kiss.

"Touya..." Souma frowned when they drew apart, gasping for air. I'm not letting him get out of this one that easily.

"All right, all right. I'll try to be nice to her in the future. Happy?" He made a face at the word 'nice' as if it left a foul taste in his mouth. "Now can we go back to me being appreciative?"

Souma laughed as she let him pull her back in for another kiss.

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Cold air blasted through the vents in the roof, quickly drying the sweat that made the sheets stick to Souma's skin. Touya wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her flush against his side as he nuzzled her hair. He hummed in pleasure as she traced circles along his chest.

Her fingers came to rest lightly over the puckered scars that crisscrossed over his ribcage. She closed her eyes, her mind flashing back to the day when she'd seen him emerge from the leader's house with blood smeared all over his face, bearing a savagely triumphant grin. She could still recall the way his sharp canines had peeked from between his lips as he'd staggered towards her only to collapse at her feet. She remembered peeling back his torn shirt to get her first look at his mangled chest. Emeraude had been the one to react the quickest, bringing him to the building that she'd later claimed as the infirmary.

That had been the day that Touya had freed the Scavengers from The Company's control. Though his reasons for doing so had been more personal, only a few Scavengers knew the real reason why Touya had gone berserk and torn apart the humans stationed at the mines.

The monsters that called themselves their masters had taken his poor, sweet little sister and destroyed her. It hadn't been uncommon for the humans to take a slave from the mines for a day to have some 'fun'. Souma herself remembered having to submit to that treatment, but what those men had done to Sakura... It had just been the poor girl's luck to have been taken out of the mines on the day the tunnel collapsed, but maybe getting crushed under tons of raw Cerellium would have been better compared to what had happened to her. Souma shuddered at the memory, and she felt Touya tighten his grip around her.

"What is it? I didn't hurt you, did I?" He sounded so worried it almost made Souma smile. He made to pull away, no doubt to check if he had accidentally bitten her, but Souma buried her face in his chest, stopping him.

"It's nothing," she replied, her words muffled against his skin as she paused to press a kiss against a scar. "I was just thinking."

"What about?"

"I almost lost you once," she whispered.

"But you didn't," he assured her, brushing his calloused fingers across her back.
"Because Emeraude was there." She sighed as his hand trailed along her thigh. "I don't know what I would have done if you had died."

"You would have taken over the Scavengers and led them in my place," he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Maybe." She smiled, humoring him. Her thoughts drifted from the memories of that day to the discussion that had taken place in Touya's office only a couple of hours ago. She would have to pay the Liberalists a visit soon.

"You're still thinking of something." Touya frowned into her hair, drawing her out of her thoughts when he hooked his fingers under her knee and pulled her leg over his waist.

"Just wondering. I have to go talk to Tomoyo tonight," she replied, splaying her hand against the well-toned muscles of his stomach. "It's a good thing she's still upholding the deal that you made with Steel."

"She might have taken over control when Steel disappeared but she knows better than to try and liberate the Scavengers." Touya scoffed. "Of course she'd keep up her end of the deal. She doesn't want to deal with the Scavengers on top of trying to put up a fight against The Company."

"Which is rather ironic, now that I think about it," Souma said as she closed her eyes, pressing her ear to his chest to listen to the comforting sound of his heartbeat. "She's a human, and a rich one at that. Or she would have been had she stayed put amongst the elites. I still can't understand why she chose to leave her place as the heir to Piffle Princess Company and join the Liberalists…"

"People do strange things for stranger reasons." Touya said as he caught her hand to twine their fingers together. "So you're going to be paying her a visit tonight?"

"That's true." She agreed. "Someone has to tell her that we need Masooma for a day."

"I don't think the witch's boyfriend likes me very much," Touya admitted.

"Because you were rude to her the first time she came over," Souma chuckled.

"She called me a barbarian to my face!" he protested.

"Can you blame her?" she smirked, tilting her head to meet his gaze. "You are a barbarian." Souma climbed on top of him, their lips brushing together as she continued in a whisper. "But you're my barbarian."

She kissed him, hoping that would be enough to keep him from inquiring further. There was still something bothering her, but she didn't want to spoil the mood by bringing it out into the open. She already suspected his reasoning and she wasn't sure she wanted him to confirm it.

"Okay," he pulled away with an exasperated look. "What else is on your mind?"

Souma dropped back on the bed with a heavy sigh, pulling the sheets with her as she went, making Touya yelp in protest when cold air hit his body.

"Why are you so insistent on making the hybrid a part of your circle?" she asked, letting him draw the sheets over himself before speaking. "He's unstable and an unknown factor. We know there was no raid last year where we might have had a run in with Syaoran, 'the single brother to four older, Unnatural sisters.'" She paused for a moment to frown at him. "The first time you ever spoke face to face with that guy was when Emeraude had him still tied up in a straightjacket."
"He's a hybrid," Touya sighed and Souma felt her heart sink. Sometimes, she hated knowing Touya so well.

"He is also a person, Touya. Not a weapon to be used."

"I never said he wasn't," Touya replied as he crossed his arms.

"You're having Emeraude rip out his memories, stealing away any chance he might have of recovering from whatever The Company did to him."

"Do you really think I'm such a heartless monster, Souma?" Touya asked, looking down at her face with a wounded expression. "That boy... whatever those bastards did to him... it reminds me of what happened to Sakura. I failed her, but I could make a difference this time, Souma."

"Touya..."

"Do you honestly believe he can recover? Emeraude had to seal his memories to give him some semblance of sanity. Now he's drugged up and back in a straightjacket. If you think that leaving him like that will help him, then fine, I'll go to her right now and tell her."

"I want to believe you, Touya, I really do, but... that's not your only reason, is it?"

Touya looked away.

"You said it yourself. He's a hybrid, and while I'm not saying you lied to me about why you want him, it's not the complete truth. He's one of The Company's Unnaturals." She pushed on. "If you cure him and he works for you, it would serve to undermine them. You, an Unnatural and a former slave, would be wrestling control of their precious experiments right from under them."

"Is that such a bad thing?" he asked softly, refusing to meet her gaze.

"Oh, Touya..." she murmured, wondering why she felt so disappointed. It shouldn't matter to her anyway. Even if he intended to use the boy in a power play, it wasn't his only reason for wanting to cure Syaoran. Shouldn't that be enough for her?

"I just remembered," Touya said as he slipped off the bed, giving her a view of his back for a moment as he picked up his jeans from the floor, "there are a few reports I still need to look over. And I also have to survey the repairs on the southern mining shaft. If I'm not here when you get back from the city, that's probably why. Stay safe, all right?" Without turning to look at her, Touya walked out the room, pausing only long enough to snatch his shirt from the chair next to the door.

Souma watched him go before silently climbing off the bed, making sure the sheets were secure around her body before padding across the carpeted floor to collect her clothes. She knew that Touya wouldn't be coming back tonight. Shaking her head to push away the feelings of resentment, she hurried towards the bathroom. She had a meeting with Tomoyo to get ready for.

Chapter End Notes

Yuui isn't the only one lying and deceiving it would seem. ;) I know Touya and Souma never interacted in the manga and they both have someone else they love but this crack pairing is so much fun to write! I've fallen in love with it though I'm not sure if you guys share my opinion. By the way, I'm curious. Can anyone guess what sort of
Unnatural Touya is?
Masooma walked through the cobblestone streets, watching as the Scavengers went about their everyday affairs. Curious eyes followed her as she walked with Souma, but no one approached the two. A few people even went so far so as to move completely out of their way as Souma led the way towards the residential area. It irked Masooma that the Scavengers feared her just because she was accompanied by their leader's right hand woman. But she knew better than to point it out.

Ever since Steel's disappearance, peace between the Liberalists and the Scavengers had been tenuous, despite Tomoyo's best efforts. Masooma didn't want to do anything to jeopardize the treaty by offending their leader. Instead, she focused her attention on the mysterious Vampirosa she was supposed to help. She had been told that her patient was being kept in Emeraude's private quarters. Masooma had tried inquiring about him, but Souma hadn't been very specific about the details surrounding his illness except that it required the aid of a mage to cure. And that Emeraude had specifically requested for her assistance.

Confused and curious, Masooma had prepared a bag of medication she might need and headed out with Souma. Now, as they paused outside the wooden door to Emeraude's cottage, Masooma couldn't help but wonder what she might find on the other side.

"Emeraude." Souma rapped her knuckles against the door and it was immediately pulled open. Emeraude stood in the doorway and Masooma's attention was immediately drawn by the usually immaculate woman’s unkempt curls and the dark circles ringing her eyes. Despite her ethereal beauty, Emeraude seemed to look every bit her three hundred years of age. This young Vampirosa must be someone very important to her, she thought as Emeraude let them in.

"I thank you for coming on such short notice," Emeraude said with a tilt of her head.

"Of course." Masooma offered her a small smile as Emeraude stepped aside to let her in.

"I'll be heading off now," Souma announced. "Send a message through Eagle when you're done here."

"The little one is through here," Emeraude said, drawing Masooma's attention away from Souma's retreating back. Masooma redjusted the strap on her medical bag and followed after Emeraude. "I have to keep him sedated," Emeraude told her as she flicked on the light switch. Masooma drew in a sharp breath at the sight that greeted her eyes.

The room appeared as if a giant hand had taken hold of it and given it a violent shake. The lamp was smashed on the floor; the bedside table was nothing more than splinters and broken wood. The wallpaper and curtains hung in tatters, and it appeared as if someone had hastily put the bed back in its proper place, though the sheets were missing. Her attention, however, was drawn to the strait-jacketed figure she could see curled up on mattress.

"What happened to him?" Masooma said, taking care not to step on anything broken. "Souma wouldn't say much."

"I suspect it has something to do with his transformation," Emeraude said, moving past Masooma to perch on the edge of the bed. "I have not been able to get to the root of the matter, but I have
devised a treatment that has proven somewhat effective."

"I was told he's a newly-turned Vampirosa." Masooma watched Emeraude comb her fingers through the young man's hair. "I wasn't aware that the insanity triggered by an improper transformation was curable."

"Under normal circumstances, it is not," Emeraude replied as she continued brushing her charge's hair with her hands. Masooma had never seen her behave in this manner with another patient. *I wonder why this one is different.*

"How can I help?" she asked, setting down the medical bag before walking around to get a better look at the yet-to-be-named Vampirosa. "He looks so young."

"He is," Emeraude nodded. "He's also a close friend of Touya's."

"I see." *I guess that explains why Emeraude is trying to cure him instead of following their usual protocol,* Masooma thought. "So how does the procedure work?" She gave Emeraude a curious glance.

"I have observed that something in the little one's memories acts as a trigger for his insanity. Severing that connection allows him to retain his senses, although the memory suppressant I have prescribed for him only allows for a temporary fix."

"How is that?"

"He did not take his medicine last night," Emeraude replied. "I know it's not my place to say this, but wouldn't it be kinder to just...allow him to..." Masooma trailed off when she caught the expression on Emeraude's face. Shaking her head, Masooma grabbed the medical bag and began rummaging inside. "Never mind. If you called me here, I take it you have an idea for a more permanent solution to his sickness?"

"I do," Emeraude agreed as she continued running her fingers through the young Vampirosa's hair, much like a mother might with her sleeping child. Masooma waited for her to elaborate further, though it took Emeraude a few moments to continue. "We need to remove the little one's memories."

"What?" Masooma couldn't stop the gasp from escaping her lips as she stared at Emeraude. "But that's...You can't just...I mean, if you take away his memories he'd be...that's just...No!"

"Are you refusing to honor the agreement Steel had with Touya?" Emeraude quirked a brow, her face suddenly devoid of all emotion.

Anger bubbled in the pit of Masooma's stomach as she stared back. "Steel's agreement with Touya did not extend to my help in robbing people of their pasts."

"I find it just as unpleasant and repulsive as you do, Healer Masooma. However," Emeraude looked away, sadness leaking into her voice when the younger Vampirosa groaned in pain and tried to shift away, "I do not wish for this little one to die. The reason I asked for your assistance is because you are the most qualified mage I know. I could just as easily have one of the Scavengers perform the spell, but they do not have your experience in the art of healing. We both know the risks involved. Do you really want this little one's demise to be on your conscience?"

"This is wrong. Is he even aware of what you'll be taking away from him?"
"He is aware of the fact that his memories are the root of his sickness."

*But that doesn't mean he knows you want to take away everything that he is.* "If we go through with this procedure, he won't even be the same person anymore."

"But he'll be alive."

"Is it really living if you don't even know who you are anymore?" Masooma argued.

Emeraude remained silent, and Masooma realized that she had no chance of convincing her to change her mind. Even if Masooma refused to help, Emeraude would have one of the Scavengers do the procedure. But unlike Masooma, a mage without any experience in mind magic might cause irreversible damage to the young Vampirosa's mind. Masooma sighed in defeat, knowing she couldn't let the 'little one' suffer any more than he absolutely had to. Not when she knew she could do something.

"If we are going to go through with this, I'm going to need Yamura's help to isolate the memories that we need to extract."

"Shall I ask Souma to fetch her?"

"No. I don't think Yamura would appreciate me pulling her away from her patients," Masooma said with a shake of her head. "I can link with her from here. I just told you so that you don't get alarmed if I don't respond to anything you say for a while." Masooma moved around the bed to sit behind the 'little one's' body, gently laying her hands on his shoulders to shift his head into her lap. "Is it safe to unstrap him if he's sedated?" she asked as she began to channel her magic into the tips of her fingers, tracing out the basic framework of a linking spell.

"I am afraid not. Our higher metabolic rates make the effectiveness of sedatives harder to predict. For the little one, even more so," Emeraude said as she fussed over his body while watching Masooma weave the threads of her spell. Masooma went a little slower than usual with the process, knowing that Emeraude always enjoyed watching her magic at work. I wonder why she isn't using his name. Masooma frowned as she glanced down at the unconscious Vampirosa in her lap. "Please make sure he doesn't move until we are done," she said as she finished casting her spell. Lacing the tips of her fingers with healing magic, she pressed them against the young man's temples before the world around her began to shift as her mind was linked to her patient and Yamura.

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Yamura was glad that she had already been sitting when she felt Masooma's magic link with her mind. But she did feel a surge of annoyance as she glanced down at her untouched cup of tea. She had just finished her initial evaluation of 147, the Unnatural girl that had mysteriously appeared in the Steel imposter's room. Yamura had had a busy morning, and she had really been looking forward to having a nice, relaxing cup of tea. *It's going to go cold by the time Masooma is done with me.* Yamura didn't bother hiding her irritation at Masooma's sudden intrusion into her mind when she was pulled from her office into unfamiliar surroundings.

"I would have appreciated a little warning before you pulled me away," Yamura said as she looked around. The world around her appeared hazy, shifting in and out of focus as if something was trying to erase it.

"Oops." Masooma materialized in front of her with a cheeky grin, hanging upside down from what appeared to be the roof. "I knew I was forgetting something."
"Is this your patient's mindscape?" Yamura quirked a brow as the sand underneath her feet swirled and disappeared to reveal a cracked stone floor. Looking up to the roof, she saw it swirling in a similar manner around Masooma's feet, with the roof serving as the ground for the other healer. *Or is it the other way around?*

"Yeah, Emeraude said he was transformed by an unwilling sire in The Company."

"An insane *Vampirosa*?" Yamura asked, watching Masooma walk towards a side wall connecting the roof to the floor. Masooma stepped onto the wall as if it was the floor and Yamura quirked a brow in surprise. Sand continued moving and shifting across the cracked bricks, revealing strange, indecipherable glyphs etched into the stones, and Yamura crouched down to get a closer look. "Why aren't they following standard protocol?"

"He's someone important to Touya," Masooma replied, losing her cheerful disposition as she hopped to the floor next to Yamura and brushed her fingers across a set of characters that Yamura had revealed by shifting the sand. "This has got to be one of the strangest mindscapes I've been in."

"I agree, although your patient's insanity might be to blame for that," Yamura said, though she felt as if calling it a strange place was a bit of an understatement. Every mindscape for different for the simple reason that no two individuals were ever identical, and the mindscape was merely a mental projection of everything that a person was. As such, Yamura had seen some strange mindscapes due to the nature of her work, but this place topped them all. Yamura nearly fell back in surprise when she heard the toll of a bell, and the ground below her feet cracked apart to reveal… nothingness.

"What the hell is that?" Masooma pointed towards something behind her, and Yamura turned around to see a fissure spreading through the wall behind her. It swallowed the sand that was swirling along the stones and Yamura caught sight of a huge brass bell that hung in the nothingness beyond the wall when the fissure grew wider.

With each toll of the bell, the fissure shifted, snaking across the stone as if alive. Yamura hastily stepped back when it moved across the junction of the wall and the floor, heading in their direction, sucking up the sand as it went.

"I think it's linked to whatever is causing all this chaos," Yamura said, catching another glimpse of the tolling bell through a shifting crack. *This place is falling apart.*

"I found another likely cause too," Masooma told her as she stood up, motioning for Yamura to follow her as she stepped onto the wall and started walking towards the roof. Yamura watched Masooma move across the junctions with mild apprehension before following her, her stomach flipping when she crossed from the floor to the wall. It was, Yamura decided, a very unpleasant sensation. One of the bricks beneath her feet gave under her weight and fell into the nothingness, nearly pulling Yamura along with it. Masooma grabbed her hand and pulled her to safety. "I didn't think I'd have to warn *you* to watch your step. Be careful."

Yamura ignored Masooma's chastising tone as she observed the bricks fall for a short distance before their descent slowed and they simply hung in the vacuum. The markings on the stones pulsed with the tolling bell.

"Come on." Masooma beckoned, interrupting Yamura's scrutiny. Filing away her observations about the glowing glyphs and the shifting fissures, Yamura followed Masooma, moving across the interconnected walls that did not appear to form a cohesive shape. It almost felt as if they were walking on the surface of a giant, warped puzzle that wrapped around itself.
Masooma led her to a wall that had a simple wooden door standing vertical to its surface. Compared to the rest of their surroundings, the door was the most normal thing Yamura had encountered since she'd arrived. Without waiting for any prompts from Yamura, Masooma pushed on the handle-less door, which swung inwards to reveal an entirely different place.

"It doesn't make sense for this to exist in a place like this, does it?" Masooma said as they stepped over the threshold into what appeared to be a room lined with shelves upon shelves of books that stretched out towards the nothingness still hanging above their heads.

Yamura approached the nearest shelf and picked up a book with a glyph etched into its leather-bound cover. She frowned when she tried and failed to open it.

"I tried that too," Masooma told her. "Can't get any of them to open for me, and it would seem that neither can you."

"This place is less damaged than the outside," Yamura murmured, brushing her fingers against a few other books once she had put away the one she had picked. "It's strange; it almost feels similar to the place outside, yet it's not quite the same."

"You can feel that too?" Masooma asked, sounding relieved that she hadn't been the only one to sense it.

"This almost feels like a second set of memories."

"But why would he have two sets? It's not like he could have lived two entirely different lives."

"No, I don't think it's that." Yamura shook her head. "Despite the similarities, this structure looks like it belongs to someone else entirely. A twin brother perhaps? Although I do wonder how he could have ended up with this second set. No matter. What exactly are we supposed to be doing in here?"

"Something in either of these memories acts as a trigger for his insanity," Masooma explained as she walked back outside. "Have you noticed what happens when that bell tolls?"

"You suspect that's what's causing the damage in here?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does," Yamura said, stepping out of the way of a crack as it slithered across the floor towards the door. "Shall we begin the extraction now?"

Masooma replied by raising her right hand, skillfully tracing out a spell through the air. The runic symbols glowed as they hovered in the air while Masooma waited for Yamura to begin with her part. Extracting memories was a delicate process, one that they had only tried on patients that had no hopes of recovering from what The Company had put them through. A Magirius alone could cast the spell to extract these memories, but without Yamura's ability to stabilize the mindscape as the connections were severed for the process to occur, the smallest mishap could shatter the patient's psyche.

Yamura crouched on the ground, pressing the palms of her hands against the warm stones. She reached out with her senses, cementing the walls as Masooma's magic seeped into them, slowly pulling out the etched glyphs that signified the episodic memories of their current patient. Once they were done with this set, they would move back to the room with the books and repeat the same. It was unheard of for someone to have two sets of memories, but she had no idea of the sort of life this young Vampirosa had led. For all she knew, it was entirely possible that the second set
was a result of some experiment The Company had performed on him.

It seemed to take them an eternity to completely extract the memories, which then condensed themselves in the form of a pale brown feather.

*Memories always take the form of an object that holds a special meaning for their possessor,* Yamura thought, recalling the objects their previous patients' memories had formed. "I wonder what could have happened for feathers to become so important for him." *I hope I can get a chance to perform a few observational tests on this Vampirosa.*

"Who knows?" Masooma shrugged as she plucked the feather from the air, sealing it away with her magic. Yamura stood up and led the way back to the other room. Pressing her hands against the wooden shelves, she stabilized the structures as Masooma wordlessly began to repeat the process for the second set of memories.

Chapter End Notes

Syaoran's deteriorating mindscape was inspired by Inception. The sassy, tea-loving Hinata Yamura was borrowed from Tonight's the Night's fic Shatterheart, with her permission of course. She's a fun character to work with so I'll probably be borrowing her from time to time in my various AUs.

Syaoran's memories were extracted in OC point of views but this will be the last of such POV chapters for a while. Syaoran will be a more regular pov character from here on out as his insanity has been dealt with. Or has it? ;) With no memories of his past, he's going to be quite different from the person we've seen so far. It'll be interesting to see how Kurogane, Fai and Mokona will react to this new version of him if they ever come across him. I'd love to hear your thoughts on what Syaoran might be like once he wakes up so feel free to leave a comment below :)
Fai ignored the looks some of the other Unnaturals shot him as he walked through the cafeteria with his head held high. He set the tray down on an unoccupied table at the end of the room. Suppressing the urge to sigh, Fai glanced down at the two items that constituted his breakfast that day: a bag of blood and a plastic bowl filled with a glob of unappetizing yellow sludge. Fai ran a hand through his hair, his fingers effortlessly gliding through the damp strands that were shorter than they’d been in years.

The black button-down shirt and slacks that Fai had borrowed from Roy, or Pyro as the man had insisted on being called once they'd left the showering stalls, were a little loose on his wiry frame. But despite wearing clothes that were a size too big on him, Fai felt better now that he'd washed off the blood and sweat.

Picking up the plastic spoon, he dipped it into the yellow sludge. The gunk stuck to the underside of the spoon when he lifted it, extending from the bowl in a thick cord. Fai made a face.

"It's not going to come alive and crawl off the table, you know," Roy said as he dumped his own lunch on the table and took a seat across from him. The man gave him a wry grin, nodding towards the sludge, which fell back into the bowl with a dull plop. "I admit it looks awful, and trust me when I say it tastes equally bad, but it's got all the nutrients we need. The higher-ups don't want us malnourished. It would be bad for business if their main attractions were too weak to fight."

Fai took a bite and realized that the sludge had no flavor whatsoever. "It could do with some salt," he said, making Roy laugh.

"So tell me, aside from the stuff that's televised during the matches, what do you know about the Gladiator Program?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Fai admitted. More like 'nothing at all'.

"I guess that means you were never a part of the Liberalists, then."

Fai said nothing to Roy's attempt to fish for information about him. It was obvious that Roy was curious about him, considering that Fai looked like Yuui from Cavahall. But while Fai was an Unnatural, Yuui was apparently a normal human being. 'How can you look like clones when you obviously don't share the same genetic makeup?' Roy had asked on their way to the cafeteria, though Fai had feigned ignorance.

There was a chance that Roy might believe his story if Fai were to tell him why he and Yuui looked alike. But Fai didn't want to risk the safety of his companions for the sake of Roy's curiosity. There were cameras everywhere, and he had no doubt there was someone at the other end watching them at all times.

Or maybe I'm just being paranoid. But I can't risk Akira finding out about Kurogane and Mokona. Not after what she did to Syaoran…

"Word of advice," Roy said, drawing him out of his thoughts, "when your handler tells you to fight, you don't make a fuss. Do as he says, all right?"
"Why?"

"The Gladiator Program is more or less your last chance." Roy explained, pausing to take a bite of the yellow sludge. "If you try to fight back in the other programs, they'll just switch you around and see what would work best. But once you're in the GP... well, let's just say it's best if you keep your head down and do as they say. If you get lucky and you manage to survive the annual events, your handler will put you up for sale to potential clients. You know, so that they can send you back in next year as their champion or whatnot."

"And h-h-how is that getting l-l-lucky?" Fai asked,

Roy hesitated, glancing around once to ensure no one was eavesdropping before leaning towards him.

"There's always a chance that you could be bought by a sympathizer and set free," Roy told him in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "I know it doesn't sound like much, but it's all you can hope for at this stage."

"I r-r-refuse to believe that," Fai shook his head, picking up the spoon he'd allowed to drop back into the bowl. He stirred it around in the sludge, wondering if he was hungry enough to eat the rest. He had mentioned his desire to consume something other than blood back when they had been getting the food, but...

"Maybe I should just stick with blood bags for now."

"Don't try anything stupid," Roy warned him. "If your handler decides that you're not worth their time, you're going to be used as an example to keep all the other gladiators in line. Trust me, it's better to just go along with what they want and persevere till you can be sold off."

"And what if I don't get bought by a sympathizer?" Fai asked as he pushed away his food in favor of grabbing the blood bag. "What if it's someone that wants to send me back h-h-here, come next year?"

"Then you're doomed to die here, I suppose." Roy shrugged. "That's what usually happens to most of the gladiators who get sent back anyway. There are the exceptions of course. Your lovely opponent for this afternoon is a prime example. But then again, Lupa doesn't really appear to be quite right in the head anymore, if you know what I mean."

"You mean she's insane," Fai prompted.

"More like desensitized. Maybe insane. Probably both." Roy shrugged again before dropping his voice back to a whisper. "It's a pity, really. She should have been sold off two years ago, after she won her first match. I don't know all the details, but her parents were part of one of those rich, upper-class families that's got their shares in just about everything. But a rogue Unnatural broke into their home while her parents were away attending some sort of dinner party and killed all the servants. But he decided to spare the girl... for the most part. The werewolf left behind a parting gift by infecting the daughter, you see. I don't know how she managed to evade detection for so long, being who she was, though I did hear a rumor that her family was protecting her."

"So h-h-how did she end up h-here?"

"That is the question, isn't it? I only have rumors to go by. And they're not completely reliable when it comes to this. Obviously no one has been able to confirm anything from her. I heard that the last guy who asked her about that ended up getting torn limb from limb in the very next match against her. Speaking of which, for a guy who's soon going to be dead, you don't look worried at all."
"What makes you think I'll die?"

"You're going up against La Lupa, man. She won't stop until one of you is dead."

"I'm not dying before I fulfill my promises," Fai declared with a shake of his head as he extended his canines and bit into the blood bag. Stale blood gushed past his lips. A few drops dribbled down his chin, and he hastily wiped them off with the back of his hand.

"I don't mean to sound like an asshole when I say this, but…" Roy leaned back in the plastic chair as he crossed his arms across his chest, "I really hope you have something more than promises to back that confidence."

Fai wasn't foolish enough to underestimate La Lupa, even though he had never seen her fight before, but everyone he'd come across so far seemed to hold her fighting prowess in high regard. Whoever she was, she would undoubtedly be a challenging opponent. Still, Fai was confident enough in his abilities to know he would survive the fight. From the sound of it, the handlers allowed the Unnaturals to access their abilities during these matches. Or some parts of their abilities, at the very least. There was no other way for a girl, no matter how strong, to rip apart her opponent limb from limb, as Roy had put it.

So if his guess was correct, he would be allowed to use his magic. Magic that grew stronger with each spell that he cast. And even if by some twist of his dubious luck he was only allowed to use his vampire abilities, Fai was certain he would survive. I don't like to kill, but if the choice is between me and a crazy wolf girl…Fai didn't bother finishing that thought as he drained the blood bag and dropped it onto the table.

"Don't worry," Fai did an imitation of one of Kurogane's bloodthirsty grins, "I do."

"I wish you the best of luck in that case."

They both fell silent after that and Fai took the time to observe the other gladiators, spotting quite a few familiar faces in the crowd. The High Priest from Clow sat next to a man with spiky green hair halfway across the hall. A blond librarian that Fai was certain he had come across in Rekourt sat across from the two. Three table down was a man who had been part of Shougo's gang in Hanshin Republic. Two tables across sat an archer Fai had met in Shura. Or was it Shara? It feels like a lifetime ago now.

"So tell me," Fai said, shaking himself out of his thoughts as he returned his attention to Roy. "H-H-How did you end up in the GP?"

"Got caught in a raid that went wrong," Roy replied with forced nonchalance. "There were a few Unnaturals in one of the Company-controlled-sectors that wanted our help to get out of the city. We decided to move in at night and sneak them to one of our sectors. One of the Unnaturals was a really powerful A-Class Elemental, you see. Normally, Elementals don't really have to worry about being detected or getting caught if they're careful about when they use their powers. But this particular Elemental made a mistake. So The Company started tracking him, which meant that we had to move quickly and make sure we got him out. Unfortunately for us, the guys watching the Elemental caught wind of our plans and they set up an ambush."

Roy's face took on a faraway look as he continued his story.

"Steel wanted to lead the extraction himself. The Elemental was someone he'd once known. A friend of the family or something, so he insisted on going. Even though Tommy warned him about how dangerous it would be considering that we already knew that the Elemental was being
watched. But Steel refused to listen. So, obviously, I volunteered to go along with the extraction team. They were ready for us, though. I can't really recall much of what happened since I took a pretty bad hit to the head. But I do remember that I managed to hold them off long enough for Steel to escape with his friend."

"I h-h-hope they made it back safely."

"He might not have any Unnatural gifts on his side, but if there's anyone I trust to make it through that kind of shit, it's Black Steel."

Fai barely managed to conceal his surprise at that name. *Was he this world's Kurogane? Even if he managed to escape during the raid, he'd be dead now, if he's the same as Kurogane... The Yuui that Roy knows must be dead too. I wouldn't be here otherwise, and neither would Kuro-tan. "— reason why the Liberalists consider him our leader,"* Roy was saying, and Fai forced himself to pay attention. "Even if he can be a little impulsive at times."

"H-H-How long ago did this h-happen?"

"Around six months, I think," Roy shrugged. "What about you?"

"A teleportation spell gone awry," Fai replied without missing a beat. "We somehow l-l-landed inside The Company building."

"We?"

"A friend was with me but...h-he died."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's—"

"On your feet, 224," Kyle ordered from halfway across the hall, cutting off Fai's words.

"Looks like it's time for your fight," Roy said as Fai stood up. "Good luck."

"Let's go." Kyle beckoned impatiently, and Fai offered his new friend a parting smile.

"I'll see you l-l-later."

"224, let's move," Kyle snapped and Fai hurried to his handler's side. Kyle made an impatient noise in his throat as he turned on his heels and began moving towards the hall's exit. Fai had to jog to catch up. He nearly lost his balance and fell flat on his face when someone with a familiar face bumped into his shoulder as they walked past him.

*Kamui?* Fai wondered, freezing his footsteps for a fraction of a second as his mind instinctively identified the vampire as his sire.

"We don't have all day, 224," Kyle reminded him in a scathing tone as he grabbed Fai's wrist, pulling him along before Fai could fully process this new information. "There's someone waiting to meet you before your match begins," he said, pushing Fai through a doorway. "I'm not very happy with the way you're fixating on this Unnatural despite what the directors have said, but if letting you see it is the only way to get you off my back..." Kyle said to the other person in the room with him as he closed the door. "You've got five minutes with it."

Fai looked around the room, noting a silhouette in one of the darkened corners. He squinted, trying
"I'm not pleased by the stunt you pulled the other day, 224," Naba said as she sashayed into the light. Fai quirked a brow. Did she think she could intimidate me like that? "Because of your insolence, the directors seem to think I'm not fit to train slaves anymore. You even cost me 109. But no matter. I'm willing to overlook all that," Naba said as she slowly approached him. Fai wondered if she had any reason to act so confidently around him now that she didn't have the collar to shock him into submission anymore.

"Are you, now?"

"I am, if you agree to do as I say." Naba nodded as she trailed her fingers along Fai's arm. Knowing that she had no jurisdiction over him, Fai caught her wrist, pushing her away from him as he narrowed his eyes. "And there it is again. Your infuriating tendency to defy me when all I want is for you to learn your proper place."

"You're insane. I h-h-have no reason to do as you say."

Naba's eyes flashed in anger as she recoiled at his words.

"That bitch!" she snarled and Fai's eyebrows shot up in surprise. What? "She damaged you. I made her swear she'd be careful and she still damaged you."

"What are you talking about?"

"You, what else?" Naba yelled, only reigning in her anger when Kyle knocked at the door in warning. She appeared to come to her senses as she made a show of trying to get a hold of her anger. "Never mind that, though," Naba said in a much sweeter tone as she smiled at Fai. "I didn't come to discuss the consequences of Akira's actions. Listen closely, 224. As soon as you walk out that door, you're going to be pitted against a monster. I know it's a scary thought, but don't worry. All you have to do is make sure you lose the fight and I'll take care of the rest, all right? You'll be back at my side in no time, and I can teach you everything there is to know about being an excellent entertainer. When I'm through with you, you'll have all the customers you could ever want. Not even your little handicap will stand in the way of that."

"You're even more of an idiot if you think that I would want to r-r-return to that. I'd much rather die facing L-La L-Lupa then come back to you."

"You will do as I say, 224," Naba hissed venomously as she drew close to him. "Or you will face the consequences of trying to defy me, my little stuttering pet."

When did I stutter? He thought in confusion.

She stepped away with a sweet smile, walking around him before vanishing through the door. Half a minute later, the door was pulled open by Kyle and Fai was led towards the arena where he caught his very first look of the Gladiator known as La Lupa.

Chapter End Notes

Naba is insane and a few familiar faces made an appearance. Fai is headed off for his match against La Lupa. Will his unfulfilled promise to avenge Syaoran be enough to
help him survive? Don't forget to drop me your thoughts in the comments. ;)}
"As good as that plan sounds, I'm not an Unnatural," Kurogane pointed out.

"I know," Nixon said, giving him a look that was surprisingly reminiscent of the mage whenever the idiot thought he had a clever plan. "But you could become one."

Kurogane stared at the man, unimpressed.

"Well?" Nixon asked, looking hopeful.

"I could become an Unnatural," Kurogane repeated in a level tone.

"Yeah." He nodded, sounding pleased. "I know this guy, who knows this other guy, who's in touch with this rich guy who's got a few shares in The Company but is a sympathizer. You know, he's bought a few slaves and set them free before. So if we get in touch with him, I'm pretty sure he'll agree to help us. He can enter you as his champion, providing you with the perfect opportunity to rescue your friend. We can even make it so that none of the blame for the rescue falls on him, so that he can continue doing what he does and all."

"Right. And you just happen to have a bunch of magical eyeballs lying around for that? Or is your girlfriend going to donate one of hers?"

"What in the world would you need magical eyeballs for?"

"You've got to consume the source of a mage's power to become a mage yourself, don't you? Or do you have some purebred vampire blood available to you?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. Consume the source of a mage's—" Nixon abruptly cut himself off as he shook his head. "That's wrong on so many levels. Not to mention barbaric and immoral and completely insane. There are more humane ways to transfer power, you know, although they're probably not as permanent as the one you mentioned. Anyway, Masooma's magic isn't in her eyes. And to answer your earlier question, no, Masooma wouldn't be too happy with you trying to snack on her hair."

"Your girlfriend has magical hair."

"You got a problem with that?" Nixon scowled.

"No," he said defensively. "I've seen weirder shit. This shouldn't come as much of a surprise."

"Good. Now then, since that option has been shoved out of the window, I could procure some vampire blood, but I don't think those abilities would suit your style of fighting. I think you'd benefit more from— oh, wait, Tommy is coming this way. I'll explain after she leaves."

Nixon didn't explain how he knew that Tomoyo was coming, but Kurogane suspected it had something to do with the metal implants that protruded from his temples. Even without the holographic screens present, he must have had some way of connecting with the surveillance systems.
"I thought I might find you here," Tomoyo said as soon as she entered the cell, her tone carrying a hint of disapproval as she looked at Nixon.

"You could have sent me a message instead of coming to get me yourself, Tommy."

"I came to speak with him," Tomoyo replied, jerking her head towards Kurogane, though she kept her attention focused on Nixon. "Though it's a good thing that I won't have to look for you afterwards."

"After what?" Kurogane interjected, narrowing his eyes at Tomoyo before Nixon had a chance to speak.

"After I'm done speaking with you," Tomoyo said. "I met your princess Tomoyo in my dream. She managed to convince me of the truth of your story."

"Good. Now can you take the damn shackle off me?"

"I said she convinced me that you were telling the truth. I didn't say anything about you no longer being a threat."

"What the hell do you mean? If you know that I was telling the truth, then you know that I'm not working for The Company."

"You tried to kill Nixon without provocation," Tomoyo pointed out, her tone daring him to deny the accusation.

"It took Tomoyo-hime to convince you that I'm not some clone sent to kill you," Kurogane said through gritted teeth as he tried to rein in his temper. "I don't have the time to deal with your paranoia. Let me leave and that'll be the last you'll see of me."

"I can't do that." Tomoyo crossed her arms, her gaze hardening.

"Why the hell not?" Kurogane snarled, yanking at the chain in frustration. "You know I had nothing to do with what happened to Steel. I'm not working for your enemies, and I've told you I'll leave your people alone. What other reason do you have to keep me here?"

"I don't have to answer that," Tomoyo replied, turning away from him as she made to leave.

"The fuck you don't!" Kurogane yanked at the chain again, ignoring the way the shackle dug into his skin as he caught her arm. "You can't just keep me locked up for no reason."

"I'm not letting you die for a second time!" Tomoyo whirled around to glare at him, wrenching free of his grip.

Whatever retort Kurogane had come up with died on his lips when he caught sight of her bloodshot eyes. Some of his anger withered away, understanding slowly replacing the emotion as her words began to make sense. But before he could say anything at all, Nixon spoke up.

"I know this isn't really a good time to interrupt, since you're sharing a moment and all," Nixon said, his sightless eyes flickering between Kurogane and Tomoyo as he took a step forward, "but I don't think you'll have to keep him locked up for long, Tommy. At least not after…" He trailed off, giving Kurogane a hesitant look as he reached up to massage his bruised throat.

"After what?"
"No, I'm not saying anything until you swear that you won't strangle me again." Nixon shook his head, staying well out of Kurogane's reach.

"What the heck is it?" Kurogane snapped.

"Your word first," Nixon replied stubbornly.

"I won't strangle you."

"Well, it's just…ever since I found out about your friend, 224—"

"His name is Fai," Kurogane cut in impatiently, uncaring of how much of a hypocrite it made him. Even if he had never bothered to call the mage by his chosen name, he'd never reduced the man to a set of numbers.

"Okay, so when I found about Fai being in the Gladiator Program, I put surveillance on The Company databases to alert me if there was any change in his status."

"Is there a change?" Tomoyo asked.

"You could say that," Nixon said, giving Kurogane another nervous look.

"Get to the point. What's going on with the mage?"

"He's about to fight in a death match," Nixon replied. "And it's not looking good for your friend. His opponent is La Lupa."

Kurogane remembered the gladiator's name from his first week in this world. From the snatches of conversation he'd overheard, the mage's opponent was a tough one.

"Is there any way to see him fight?"

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Kurogane," Tomoyo cut in with a shake of her head.

"La Lupa is the reigning champion," Nixon explained, sounding apologetic and pitying at the same time. "She hasn't lost a single match in the last three years. There's no way that he'll—"

"I don't care what you think." Kurogane glared at the pair as he yanked at the shackle in irritation. "If you're not going to let me go, then show me his fucking fight!"

"Fine," Tomoyo snapped. "If you want to see him die, who am I to stop you? Nixon, unlock him and take him upstairs." With that, she turned on her heels and stormed out.

Nixon appeared subdued as he approached Kurogane and inserted the key to unshackle him.

"You're an utter asshole," Nixon said as the shackle fell away with a dull clack. "The match won't begin for another ten minutes," he added when Kurogane said nothing. "Since Tommy has given you the go-ahead, I guess I don't have any reason to stop you from watching Fai die. They've got the show's host babbling about the upcoming annual events right now, but I don't think you're interested in watching that down here, so follow me." Nixon led him up a flight of stairs and Kurogane was pleased to note that unlike the last time he'd followed after the blind idiot, he felt very little weakness and his breathing remained mostly even, despite the fact that they climbed up several floors to reach their destination.

A giant holo-screen came into existence as soon as Nixon had them both seated on a threadbare sofa.
— be known that 224 is said to be quite a promising fighter," said the woman on the screen, who appeared to be Cavahall's version of the chick from Hanshin Republic, Prema... no Primera. "If it can survive today's match, it might even earn the privilege to a proper name. I'm sure we'll all be interested to see if this hybrid can live long enough to gain that honor, but seeing as its opponent today is our very own La Lupa, 224's chances are quite slim.

"La Lupa has been our champion for the past three years and happens to be a crowd favorite, but don't forget to cheer for this unfortunate but very attractive hybrid. It will certainly be a tragic thing to see it go so soon, but this is the Coliseum, dearies, and only the very best can survive. Speaking of the very best, here it is, folks: your reigning champion, La Lupa-420!"

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Yuui stirred the crushed painkillers into the bowl of soup that he had prepared for Mokona as the little Unnatural watched.

"Have you managed to get any readings on your other companions so far?" he asked as he picked up the creature in one hand and the soup in the other. Moving back to the living room, he sat down on the couch and set the Unnatural's dinner in front of it. "I've got people on the lookout for them, but there hasn't been any news on either of them."

"No, Mokona doesn't know where they are," it answered, picking up the spoon in its stubby paw. Yuui thought it made for a comical sight. "Maybe they moved out of Mokona's range, and that is why Mokona can't sense them anymore."

"I didn't know there was a range for your sensing ability." Yuui said, giving the creature a curious look. "I wonder what else it's capable of."

"Mokona can sense things farther away now since Mokona has been using that technique for so long." Mokona bobbed its head. "It's just like Kuro-puu used to tell Syaoran: Practice will make it better."

"That's good to hear, little friend." Yuui smiled, watching the creature inhale its meal in seconds.

"Mokona can now sense people over the entire city, so Mokona is getting better at it."

"If your range has such a wide perimeter, I'm certain that you'll be able to sense your friends sooner or later."

"Mokona hopes it happens sooner and— The creature cut off speaking to yawn tiredly. "And then Mokona can take everyone away."

"Yes, let's hope for the best," he agreed, gently picking up the Unnatural from the coffee table and bringing it to his bedroom. "For now, though, I fear that you will have to put your worries away and focus on getting some much needed rest. Worrying yourself to sickness won't help anyone."

"Mokona is getting better now," the creature protested. "The medicine that Yuui gives is what makes Mokona feel sleepy. But Mokona doesn't feel pain anymore so Mokona wants to thank Yuui for taking care of Mokona. And for helping too. Mokona will tell the others when Mokona sees them. Fai will be very happy to see what a kind person his brother is."

"It's no problem for me, little friend." Yuui smiled, petting the top of the creature's head as it yawned for a second time. "Now, get some sleep and I will talk to you when you wake up."

Covering the creature with a cotton sheet, Yuui returned to the living room. You couldn't be more wrong, Mokona, Yuui thought as he sat down on the sofa with a heavy sigh and massaged his
Xerxes's personal communicator beeped to announce an incoming call. Picking up the device, he checked the caller ID and noticed that it was Candy. He dismissed the call and quickly moved to the bedroom to retrieve the voice modulator he used to take calls of his alternate personas while he was still Yuui. Sticking the disks to his throat, he switched on the device and called her back.

"Candy, what can I do for you, love?" he drawled as soon as she picked up.

"Xerxes, you sure took your time to call me back," Candy grumbled, sounding irritated, though she immediately perked up, not giving him a chance to speak. "Anyway, listen to this. Remember how you came to the bar a few days back, asking around about The Company's new acquisitions and all?"

"Yes?"

"Well, seeing how you were interested in them, I figured I'd keep an ear out for any developments on that front."

"I take it something has happened to the surviving Hybrid?" Yuui allowed a hint of curiosity to leak into his tone.

"Well, Jericho told me about the management putting him in the Pleasure Program and all," Candy said, reiterating something he already knew, "but he just came in a short while back and mentioned that the Hybrid was reassigned as a Gladiator. Turn on your holo-screen: he's just about to come on."

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Clang!

A distant echo pierced the emptiness. The chaotic wave rippled and multiplied, piercing through the veil of calm as the sound destroyed the nothing and gave birth to a something…someone? Hollowness marked the place where everything was wrong as the being gained awareness.

A part of… him? That was the simplest word to define the being. A part of him was missing. He didn't know what it was, but he felt incomplete.

The emptiness of his existence slowly transformed and he realized there was more to the world than the nothingness he had occupied before.

Ba-dump.

There was sound in the world, a sound other than the distant clang that had brought with it awareness.

Warmth and a delectable metallic flavor inside his mouth made him discover the senses known as touch and taste.

A hint of wet earth carrying with it the undertones of more metal and a spice taught him that the world held scents.

Heavy lids weighed down with lead struggled to part and he was assaulted by a blinding light. Squinting his eyes against the sudden brightness, he discovered sight.
More of the appetizing liquid flowed down his throat and he could almost feel the path it took through his body as it worked to invigorate him.

"Sure took your time waking up, kiddo," said a dark-haired man whom he identified as the source of the liquid. "I was worried I'd have to find someone new to mind the mines."

Confused, he swallowed a mouthful of the liquid, belatedly identifying it as blood. Why would I like the taste of blood?

"How are you feeling?" The man grinned as he retracted the arm he had pressed against his mouth and helped him sit up. The man's smile morphed into a frown when he remained silent. "Is everything okay, Syaoran?"

"That's my name?" he asked, wondering if everyone felt the same sense of detachment that he did when discovering their name. Did they have to find their names the way he had? I don't think the world works like that…

His attention was drawn to the man's wrist, where the bleeding cut had already clotted over and was slowly turning into a dark brown scab.

"Of course. What else would it be?" The man laughed, although his expression switched to worry in an instant as he peered at Syaoran. "Wait a minute, do you know who I am?"

"Should I?"

"I was hoping Emeraude had been wrong…" the man muttered under his breath, but Syaoran heard his voice clearly. He sighed, giving Syaoran a remorseful look before taking a seat on the bed next to him. "Last night, you got into an accident at the mines that resulted in a near-fatal injury, but Emeraude managed to save you. Considering that one of the falling support beams nearly crushed your skull, she said that there might be some problems with your memory, but I didn't think it'd be this bad."

"Oh." Syaoran nodded, feeling strange about his name. Even if it feels familiar, it doesn't feel like it's mine… But maybe that's because I don't have any memories. "Did she say when I could get them back?"

"That's a little hard to say," the man replied. "Since you don't remember who I am, my name's Touya. You work for me, so that makes me your employer, though I like to think we're also friends."

"You said I got injured in the mines. Is that where I worked?"

"You could say that. You kept watch on the workers there," Touya said, getting a thoughtful look on his face. "Now that I think about it, that's probably what saved your life. Had you been working with the others down in the actual mines…"

"So the other workers are dead?"

"You're the only one we could get to in time."

"I see." Were any of them my friends?

"So how much of your life do you remember?" Touya asked, looking at him with curiosity. "You know, so that I have an idea of what I should be telling you. Do you remember Meiling or Emeraude? Or the guy who sired you?"
"My father?" Syaoran's brow furrowed in confusion.

"Him, too, but I meant the man who turned you into a vampire. Do you at least remember how you ended up with the Scavengers?"

"I don't remember any of that," Syaoran replied after a moment of contemplation. The only memories he had were of things, not people. I'm a vampire…no wonder I liked blood. For someone who just lost all of his memories, I'm far too calm.

"You're taking the news rather well," Touya said as he continued to study Syaoran's face.

"Getting upset won't help me remember."

"That's true," Touya acquiesced. "Would you like me to tell you about what I know of your past?"

"I would appreciate that."

"I must warn you I don't know everything about you," Touya warned him. "You're a very private person, I've noticed. You moved to Cavahall from somewhere beyond the wastelands and spent a few years in the city with your four elder sisters. When we first met, they had already been dead a while-killed in a raid conducted by The Company, you told me, though you never mentioned their names. Shortly after that, you yourself were captured by them for being a Magirius.

"Souma was the one who found you and brought you here around six months ago. You were turned into a Hybrid while in The Company's custody, though we have no idea who turned you. We treated you for some of the stuff they had done to you while you were there. When you asked me for help, I offered you a job in the mines, and you officially became a part of the Scavengers.

"You were living on your own before, but you recently moved in with Meiling. The two of you were seeing each other, though for some reason I can't figure out, you decided to keep it a secret. Not that you were fooling anyone, I assure you. It was pretty obvious what was going on from the way you looked at each other, but I digress. Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

"I-I…if I were seeing Meiling, why isn't she here?" he asked, latching on to the first question that entered his mind.

"She was by your bedside all night, up until an hour ago when I forced her to go and get some rest since we had no idea how long you'd be out for."

"Oh."

"I could send someone to call her if you want," Touya offered as he made to stand up and Syaoran felt a wave of alarm wash over him. What can I say to someone I don't even remember?"

"No!" Syaoran yelled and Touya froze in his steps. Realizing how loud he had been, Syaoran flushed and hurriedly looked away. "I mean, let her rest," he clarified in softer voice. "You said she had been awake all night."

"If you're sure." Touya sounded skeptical

"I am." Syaoran nodded. "She must be tired." And maybe if I wait, I might remember something useful.

"Okay. Come along then."
"Come where?" Syaoran asked as he stood up, following him towards the door.

"To watch my protégé in action," Touya answered, a hint of pride coloring his voice as he led the way. "La Lupa is one of the first Lupines I created and by far the best. Maybe when The Company finally puts her on the market, I can make an arrangement to bring her here. Hurry up, the broadcast will be starting soon."

"Broadcast for what?"

"Oh man, you really don't remember anything." Touya shook his head and shot Syaoran a pitying look. Syaoran barely resisted the urge to scowl. It's not my fault I don't have any memories. "Don't worry, though. You'll find out soon enough. You used to love the Gladiator matches, so I'm hoping your amnesia won't have changed that."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter brings everyone's point of views to the present. Fai is up against the vicious La Lupa who has yet to lose a single match. Do you think he can survive the match or will his friends be treated to a live feed of his death on the show?
Syaoran has only just woken up and he's lost all of the memories that shaped him into the person we knew so there's bound to be some OOC-ness on his part, mostly because this memoryless Syaoran will react to things in a different manner without all of the personality shaping experiences to rely on.
So did anyone suspect that Touya was a werewolf? I mean I implied that he was an Unnatural but could you tell he was a Lupine?
Showdown

Fai stood in the shadows of the tunnel that led into the arena, waiting for Cavahall's version of Primera to finish making the announcements. Moments before, Kyle had activated the Cerellium filters of the nanites in Fai's body, negating the effects of the compounds that kept him from freely using his magic. The magic thrummed just beneath his skin as Fai mentally prepared himself to take his opponent's life. Fai had caught sight of La Lupa just before Kyle had brought him to the tunnel that he was to enter the arena from.

She had walked past him with her head held high, not at all like the other Unnaturals Fai had seen in The Company. Even Roy had appeared subdued in the presence of the handlers, but the way La Lupa held herself seemed arrogant. From her confidence, Fai would have mistaken her for another handler had he not caught sight of the numbers tattooed on her collarbone. He had been surprised to see her by herself, without any handlers around to guide her towards the other entrance tunnel, but maybe after years spent there, the handlers didn't deem it necessary for her.

"Speaking of the very best, here it is, folks: your reigning champion, La Lupa-420!" Primera announced, and a loud cheer echoed all over the arena. Fai watched as La Lupa sauntered out into the coliseum, her gait relaxed yet projecting a predatory grace. She waited for the cheering to die down before holding up her hand in a two fingered salute at Primera. Primera grinned in acknowledgment as she strutted over to La Lupa.

"So tell us, Lupa, how do you feel about having to fight a newbie? I don't think I've seen you pitted against a newcomer in two years," Primera said as she held out the microphone to Lupa.

"I'm certain the directors saw something in the newbie," Lupa drawled, as she rolled her head and looked in Fai's direction. Her lips pulled up in a wicked smirk when their eyes met and she held his gaze as she continued. "They wouldn't have put it up against me unless they were certain that the match would be entertaining."

"Confident as always, I see," Primera commented, and Lupa returned her attention to the show's host. Fai studied the Lupine through narrowed eyes, trying to put a name to the feeling he'd gotten when she'd looked at him. He wasn't certain what it was, but something about the way she had spoken bothered him. And it wasn't just because he was supposed to go up against her in a fight to the death. There was something off about her.

"The rumors label 224 as a rather dangerous Hybrid," Primera continued without missing a beat. "Considering how you've never fought one before, aren't you the least bit worried about the outcome?"

"I've gone up against everything that the directors have thrown at me so far," Lupa replied as she took off her glasses and deposited them in an inner pocket of her jacket. Rolling her head for a second time, Lupa glanced towards one of the one-way windows, "and I've been at the top every single time. One more of their pets won't make much of a difference to me."

"It's all an act," Fai noted, having caught the anger that flashed across Lupa's face when she had looked toward where the directors were probably seated.

"I guess I know who I'll be rooting for, folks," Primera chuckled, throwing a wink toward the small camera that hovered in front of her face. "And now, let's give a warm welcome to the delicious yet dangerous 224!"
The cheering, a little more muted than Lupa's, started once again as he walked into the open. Fai adopted the posture that he had favored during his years in Celes as the High Mage. *I am a warrior, and I am free.* He repeated the mantra inside his head as he approached Primera and La Lupa. *No matter what it takes, I will get out, and I will destroy anyone who stands in my way,* he promised silently, putting on his most charming grin when Primera turned her attention toward him.

"Will you look at that confident smile, dearies?" Primera crooned as she inched closer to him. "I get the feeling we're in for a very interesting match. Knowing that you are set to fight against our undefeated champion, how do you feel about your chances of survival, 224?"

"No offense to the current champion's skill, but I won't be dying anytime soon."

Lupa snorted dismissively. "The others that came before knew how to bark too."

"Don't worry, I can bite." Fai's smile took on a sharp edge and Lupa considered him intently.

"All right then, looks like our gladiators are ready to rip each other's throats out," Primera announced cheerfully as a metallic platform descended from the roof of the arena. She stepped onto it. The camera continued to hover between Fai and Lupa as the platform started ascending, removing the hostess from the stadium. "Send out your final messages, gladiators, for there can only be *one* victor."

"L-ladies first," Fai said with a small incline of his head that had Lupa narrowing her eyes in anger.

"I don't do that sappy shit," she growled, "and I'm not the one dying today."

"Neither am I," Fai replied, maintaining a tight hold over his magic. Kyle had instructed him to wait for the first bell to mark the start of the match and Roy had warned him against breaking any of the rules laid down by his handler. He wasn't certain of the reasons behind the delay, but he suspected it had something to do with the entertainment value. Perhaps the people of this world also drew amusement from the verbal spars held between the gladiators. Kyle's instructions *had* included throwing taunts and goading Lupa during the match.

"We'll just have to see about that," Lupa shot back just as the first bell rang. There was no other starting mark for the match, no more warning as Lupa shot toward him. Fai ducked under the sweeping blow, narrowly avoiding the clawed fingers that could have gouged the flesh right off his face. Lupa followed the attack with a sharp kick.

Fai flipped backward and sprung onto one hand, lashing out with a spinning kick of his own. Lupa dodged around the attack and jumped back a few paces as she gave him another assessing look.

"Tired already?" he asked with a quirk of his brow as he began to mold his magic for the beginnings of a spell. Under different circumstances, Fai might have enjoyed the fiery Unnatural's company, but as things were, he knew he had to take her life in order to fulfill his promise. *I have to get out of here, but for that to happen, I need to win.*

The power hummed beneath his skin like something alive as he tried to decide on the most humane spell that could kill Lupa. His magic had always had an affinity towards the offensive, which was why Fai had trained extensively with the Celesian battle-mages. And because of that, he knew of several hundred ways to end a life, but not all were quick or painless. Finally deciding on a simpler spell that would stop her heart the moment it connected, Fai allowed the power to slip from his grasp as he shaped it through his fingers. It took him a moment to realize that something wasn't
right with his magic when he failed to shape the runes needed to bind the spell. Raw energy crackled around him as the air filled with the stench of ozone and Fai abruptly cut off the spell before it had a chance to spiral out of his control. All of this took place in the half a second it took Lupa to decide on her next course of action.

"Just getting started." Lupa grinned, baring her sharpened teeth. A part of Fai watched with detached interest as her features began to morph, while the rest tried to figure out the reason behind his lapse in control. Lupa's mouth and nose elongated to a wolf-like snout and when she spoke again, her voice carried the undertones of a growl. "You better make this fight worth my effort, pretty boy."

Fai spun out of the way as she flew toward him, calling on his vampire speed to twist behind her as she landed in a crouch. So the lupines are stronger than vampires, Fai's mind supplied when he noticed the cracked dirt beneath her clawed hands, but they're slower too.

Lupa spun around with a snarl, pushing off the ground without losing a second. Fai narrowly avoided getting his kidneys ripped out and struck back with a sharp swipe of his own elongated claws. Lupa dodged out of the way. She kicked up dust beneath her feet as she wove through his attacks and retaliated with powerful blows of her own. Fai had to admit that Lupa was proving to be a tough opponent. Her unrelenting attacks kept him from finding an opening to use magic, forcing him to keep up his guard as she drove him back.

Diving to the ground to avoid a strike to his head, Fai slid under her legs and rolled to his feet behind her. Letting the momentum carry him, Fai tried to put some space between them, already gathering his magic for a different but equally-lethal spell. Magic wove around him in a latticework of energy as he spun threads of secondary spell-work to bind it all together. He felt the control slip from his grasp moments before he could complete the spell. As the energy lattice grew unstable, Fai darted away from the epicenter.

The air crackled with volatile energy as the spell collapsed on itself, exploding in a blast of magical fire that threw them both to the opposite sides of the arena.

What's happening to me? Why can't I control my spells? Fai struggled back to his feet, his ears ringing from the force of the explosion. Opposite to him, Lupa got up as well, her features once again those of an attractive human instead of a Lupine. She glared at him, though there was apprehension behind the hostility as she observed him. As soon as she started moving to her right, Fai mimicked the action, making sure that they were circling each other as he took the time to try to understand the problem with his magic.

Still keeping the distance between them, Fai tentatively reached out for his magic as he tried to cast a basic offensive spell. The spell proceeded without any difficulty whatsoever, and some of his trepidation lessened as silver lances of energy shot towards Lupa's vital spots. Yelling curses, the Lupine dove for the ground, flipping back up using her hands to spring her body over his spell. Allowing himself a tiny smirk when he caught sight of the sliver of blood smeared across her cheek, Fai traced out another spell. The stench of ozone gathering in the air around him alerted Fai to the fact that something was wrong. Bolts of electricity that should have been aimed at Lupa came shooting towards Fai instead, and it was only with vampire speed that he managed to avoid getting killed.

"What's the matter, stutter-boy?" Lupa scoffed. "Too damaged to even control your own spells?"

Too… damaged?

Everything came to a crashing halt for Fai as he recalled what Naba had said to him before the
match.

"That bitch! She damaged you. I made her swear she'd be careful and she still damaged you."

Did Akira do something while I unconscious? Alternating waves of hot and cold raced down his spine as he tried to process what it meant. I can't use my magic. I can't even control—His body acted on instinct as he rolled along with Lupa's punch, the damage healing before his skin even had a chance to bruise. Dread washed over him, making the breath catch in his throat as he blocked the next blow. They came to a momentary stalemate as his muscles strained to hold her fist back, broken only when he caught a kick to the ribs. Wheezing for breath, Fai fell to his knees as Lupa transformed back into her Lupine form, clawed fingers poised to tear out his throat.

He watched the claws slice through the air in slow motion, feeling hyper-aware of the way the sweat trickled down the back of his neck. He met Lupa's cold gaze, distantly noting the hollowness that echoed in its depths as she struck to take his life. She's damaged, too... The thought trickled into his mind as the clawed fingers drew closer and closer. Akira damaged Syaoran and he died. And now I'm going to—

Pain flared inside his chest, blossoming into a state of panic that lent his body the energy he needed to avoid Lupa's attack. The panic grew to a point where he wasn't even completely aware of his actions, body moving on autopilot as his elongated claws slashed through the air. Again and again he attacked, pushing Lupa onto the defensive. Closing the distance between them, he shoved his shoulder into her gut, sending her toppling to the ground. He took a punch to the side, feeling a rib crack under the force of the blow, but even that pain wasn't enough to draw him out of the manic haze enveloping his mind.

Vision turning grey around the edges, he grabbed Lupa around the throat and shoved her head into the dirt. Someone was screaming and it took him a moment to realize that the sounds were issuing from his own mouth as he straddled Lupa, pinning her arms to the ground with his knees. Lupa bucked and struggled beneath him as his fingers squeezed her windpipe. A choking wheeze escaped her lips as her struggles grew more frantic before growing sluggish. Blinded by panic and rage and a myriad of emotions he could not even begin to decipher, Fai tightened his grip even further. Lupa stared up at him with calm acceptance, amber eyes slowly losing their light and Fai caught sight of his own face reflected in them.

Monster... Syaoran's voice echoed inside his head, jolting him back to reality. He became aware of the wild cheering echoing all around them as the invisible crowd chanted only one word. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

What am I doing? He gasped, grip slackening on Lupa's throat. She's not my enemy. Lupa is just as much of a victim as me.

Lupa grew still in his hold and Fai glanced down, surprised that she was now glaring at him.

"Should have killed me when you had the chance, leech," Lupa snarled as she twisted, wrenching her arms free of his grip. The force of the move completely threw him off balance, sending him crashing to the ground. Faster than Fai could react, Lupa was upon him. Her claws viciously tore through his flesh and the crowd went wild as his blood splattered across the ground. His world exploded in pain before everything went dark.
Kurogane had to say that he was impressed by the mage's opponent. Despite the years that they had spent traveling and getting in and out of danger together, Kurogane had never seen the idiot go up against someone capable of pushing him on the defensive the way La Lupa was. The Unnatural gave him no time to counter as she continued her attacks. But Kurogane wasn't worried. Despite what Nixon had claimed, Kurogane was confident that the mage would be able to survive.

It wasn't until the idiot tried using magic that Kurogane realized the true extent of the danger he was in. Strings of magic poured from the mage's fingers as he wove his runes through the air, but instead of launching the attack, the mage abruptly cut off the spell and dodged out of the way with his vampire speed. Moments later, the spell-work turned into fire that blasted away both the mage and the Lupine. The picture shook and grew blurry from the force of the explosion.

Was that supposed to happen? He wondered, shifting closer to the holographic screen without even realizing it. The gladiators were already on their feet, circling each other as the image came back into focus. The mage cast another spell, the glowing runes transforming into lances of silver energy that shot towards the Lupine.

"And will you look at that? 224 has finally decided to show us what it's made of." Primera's voice rang out over the speakers even as Lupa cursed and dodged around the spells. The camera focused on Lupa's face, zooming in to show the cut on her cheek before zooming out once more. "Whoa, it looks like 224 has managed to draw blood first. Things are certainly getting exciting here, and wait- what's this? I hear that the directors are debating on the outcome of the match."

"They must really like him," Nixon said from his spot next to Kurogane, sounding awed, "or hate him, maybe. Depending on how you look at it. But I've never heard about those guys changing their minds about a match after it's begun."

Kurogane grunted in response, his attention fixed on the mage as he cast his next spell. A halo of blue enveloped the idiot right before bolts of lightning shot towards the ground, aimed at where he'd been standing moments before.

What the…

"What's the matter, stutter-boy?" Lupa scoffed. "Too damaged to even control your own spells?"

"Damaged?" The mage repeated and Kurogane frowned as all color drained from the idiot's face. Lupa followed her taunts with a punch that the magician was too stunned to block. Kurogane winced at the sickening crack, but the idiot didn't even seem to notice. He blocked Lupa's next hit, catching her fist before it could connect, though he still didn't appear fully aware of what was happening. As such, the mage missed the kick she aimed for his ribs and immediately went down when the hit connected.

What are you doing, you idiot? Kurogane would never admit it, but he was starting to worry for the mage. Something was wrong, but the moron was only now realizing it. Move! He yelled at the mage inside his head, trying to will him into avoiding his throat ripped out.

As if he had heard Kurogane, the mage moved out of the way at the last possible instant, unleashing his vampire claws as he shot towards the Lupine. Kurogane's eyebrows shot up at the sudden display of ferocity as the mage screamed, claws slashing through the air without any signs of letting up. Kurogane could only watch in shocked silence as Fai attacked Lupa relentlessly,
Uncaring of how many hits he took, the mage knocked Lupa to the ground and Kurogane felt a knot of discomfort forming in his gut. *What the hell is wrong with him?*

"I take back what I said. Your friend can definitely take care of himself," Nixon whispered as the mage straddled Lupa, his fingers wrapped around her throat in a strangling grip.

*This isn't like the mage...*

"Will you look at that, folks?" Primera's voice blared through the speakers. "224 has abandoned all pretense of grace, choosing instead to kill Lupa with its bare hands. And the crowd is loving this! No one has ever come close to doing what we're all witnessing here. Can you hear them chanting?"

Primera fell silent and the screen shifted for a moment to show the crowd of spectators sequestered safely behind the one-way glass that surrounded the arena. "Kill! Kill! Kill!" Their voice rose in a crescendo until that was the only word ringing through the air. Kurogane's insides twisted as his thoughts strayed to his time in Nihon before he was exiled. That Kurogane would have loved the idea of this tournament filled with senseless bloodshed. *Did Tomoyo ever feel this disgusted?*

The camera's focus moved back to the mage. Lupa's struggles grew sluggish, and Kurogane clenched his fist, ignoring the sinking feeling in his gut. *Come on... just get it over with,* he thought, trying to mentally coax the mage into finishing the job. With a gasp that had Kurogane gritting his teeth in frustration, the mage slackened his grip on Lupa.

"Should have killed me when you had the chance, leech." Lupa snarled, flipping their positions in a sudden move. Her pretty face morphed as she transformed, her jaws elongating till they resembled a wolf-like snout. The whites of her eyes turned black, making the luminous amber of her irises stand out even more in contrast. Baring sharpened canines, she didn't give the mage any time to react as she began tearing into his flesh.

"No!" Kurogane wasn't even aware of the scream that escaped his lips as he jumped to his feet, flying at the holographic image of the blood-drenched *Lupine*. His fist flew through the projection, serving no other purpose than to make him look like an idiot. He knew it was just an image, but he couldn't just sit back and watch as Lupa ripped apart the mage.

"Hold on a second, La Lupa has just gone down," Primera's exclamation gave Kurogane pause as hope flared in his chest. *Could the mage have survived that?* "I can see Handler Kyle walking into the arena. There are new instructions coming in from the directors, stating that their decision to keep this a death-match has been rescinded. Lucky for 224, they're just in time. 224 appears to be still alive and there are medics walking out now. La Lupa isn't looking pleased with the change, but is dutifully following its handler out of the arena.

"We'll be having a short break while 224 is patched up, but don't go anywhere, folks, because we'll be receiving the results as soon as we get back."

"Wow, he is one lucky son of a— actually you know what?" Nixon shook his head as he turned down the volume with a lazy wave of his fingers. "I'm still not sure if it's lucky or unlucky that they let him live. If they decide to put him in the final events, he's going to be up against a lot more than just Lupa."

*I can't let the moron stay there,* he thought, watching The Company's logo flash across the screen before an advertisement replaced it. *I failed the kid, but I'm not letting the mage die this way.* Mind made up, Kurogane turned to fix Nixon with a narrow-eyed stare. "What was that plan you were
"Well," Touya drawled as he turned to Syaoran, switching off the volume once the commercials started running, "I didn't see that one coming."

"224 is more skilled than the commentator made him out to be," Syaoran replied, swallowing thickly as he tried to push the image of blood from his mind. He really hadn't been able to see why he'd have enjoyed the gladiator matches before losing his memories. At least, not until he'd seen the blood fly through the air. The back of his throat burned with hunger, his stomach twisting into knots as his feral side tried to fight to the surface. But for some strange reason, instead of being horrified over getting so excited about bloodshed, Syaoran discovered that he rather enjoyed the feeling. Is this what Touya has been talking about? he wondered, thinking back to how excited Touya had gotten while explaining the point of the televised matches to him.

"So it would seem," Touya conceded. "Although, he would have been dead had the handler wasted even one more second in getting to Lupa." Syaoran did not miss Touya's use of the pronoun 'he' when referring to the Unnatural, even though the show's host had referred to 224 like an object rather than a person. I guess Touya knows the distinction between the two. "Judging by the way your eyes have started flashing, you must be enjoying the match."

Feeling embarrassed at his lack of control, Syaoran quickly averted his gaze. "S-Sorry."

"It's only natural," Touya gave a hearty laugh, thumping Syaoran on the back once before dropping his hand. "Tell you what: once the results are announced and we know for sure that Lupa's won the match, we'll grab you something to eat, hmm? I only gave you enough blood to wake you up."

"Good idea," Syaoran agreed, deciding against pointing out that 224 had just as much of a chance at winning as Touya's progeny. Something told Syaoran that Touya would disagree.

A soft knock sounded on the door and the grin vanished from Touya's face as he turned in that direction. "Come in," Touya said, all warmth suddenly gone from his voice. Syaoran wondered what could have brought on such an abrupt change in his mood. Feeling more than a little curious, Syaoran turned to face the person who entered the room. It was a woman with wavy golden hair that fell all the way to her knees. Her blue-eyed gaze lingered on Syaoran for a moment, though her attention quickly shifted to Touya. Syaoran watched as she glided across the floor to reach them.

"I am sorry to interrupt, but I came to inform you that the new energy sources have stabilized," the woman said in a soft, lilting voice which, combined with her formal speech, made Syaoran think she belonged to another time period. He caught sight of fangs peeking out from under her lips once or twice, belatedly realizing that she was a vampire. Vampires live for a long time. So maybe she does belong to another era. "The sources have fully integrated with the spell matrix, though it is too early to tell if the strengthened spell will have the desired effects."

"But it has improved the chances of recovery?" Touya pressed and Syaoran was surprised to catch the note of anxiety in his tone.

"It is too early to say," she repeated.

"I see," Touya pursed his lips. "Thank you for updating me, Emeraude, though I would suggest that next time you come to find me when I'm alone. You can go."

"My apologies. I assumed you would like to be notified as soon as possible." Emeraude inclined
her head as she turned to leave, briefly pausing near the door to glance at Syaoran. "It is good to see that you are better, Syaoran." She left before Syaoran even had a chance to say thank you.

"She seemed in a hurry to leave," Syaoran muttered, frowning at the door as he tried to comprehend what had just taken place. He had a feeling the exchange between Touya and Emeraude had been important in some way, though he had no idea why.

"She is the healer for our little group," Touya replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "She's always in a hurry. You get used to it after a while."

"Did I know her before?" Syaoran asked, drawing a blank as he tried remembering the blond woman.

"Only in passing," Touya said as he turned back to the gladiator broadcast before cursing explosively. "Damn it, she made us miss the live result!"

Sure enough, when Syaoran turned back to the holographic screen, all he could see were lines upon lines of Cavahall's written language rolling up over The Company's black and white logo.

-0-

Yuui watched the screen with wry smirk, refusing to acknowledge that his heart was beating a little faster than usual. He'd seen the Hybrid's blood fly through the air and splatter across the camera lens, but that did not mean he was worried for the man who wore his brother's face.

He had watched the start of the match with a detached sense of curiosity as Primera had waxed poetic about the two gladiators, mainly showering Lupa with praises. Lupa had walked out into the arena the way she always did, arrogance oozing out of every pore. Yuui thought he had been prepared to see the dimension-traveling version of his brother.

He had never been more wrong.

224- not his twin, never his twin because he'd been dead for a long time - had walked into the arena with a natural grace that seemed to have nothing to do with his being a vampire. When 224 had flashed that confident grin that was three-parts-charming and one-part-cocky, Yuui had to forcefully remind himself that no, it was not his brother facing the camera.

And so, he had resolved not to feel a single thing for the Unnatural. Yuui promised himself that he couldn't care less whether 224 lived or died. But then the fight began and his resolve shattered like brittle glass. Yuui couldn't help the way his heartbeat sped up or how he subconsciously shifted closer to the screen, watching in wonder as his brother dodged and wove around Lupa's attacks. Watching him in action had been something of a treat and Yuui had drunk in the sight of the man who was his twin yet not his twin at the same time.

He found himself silently cheering for Fai every time he successfully averted an attack, watching in awe as he cast a spell that shot silver lances towards Lupa. He couldn't help but grin in triumph when the camera zoomed in to show Lupa's bloodied cheek when she failed to dodge one of the spears in time.

Things went to hell a moment later when Fai lost control at Lupa's taunting and nearly strangled the Lupine before freezing up. And that moment of weakness was all Lupa had needed to gain the upper hand. Luckily for Fai, the directors had liked him enough to intervene before Lupa could tear him apart.

Leaning back on the sofa, Yuui scratched his chin in thought, only sparing a moment to glance
towards his bedroom where Mokona slept soundly. It was a good thing he had given the Unnatural some medication to aid it in sleeping or the little thing surely would have been bouncing around the room, demanding they go get Fai.

Frowning at the credits that rolled up the screen, signaling the end of the live broadcast, Yuui took a moment to contemplate the outcome of the match. Despite how easily Lupa had managed to exploit his hesitance, the directors had named Fai the winner because he had drawn first blood. Beating Lupa in the qualifier meant that Fai would most certainly be participating in the annual matches. Which would become problematic for Yuui, since his 'twin' shared the same face as the antiquities dealer. It would be troublesome if his customers started to think there was a connection between Yuui and the gladiator, but Yuui couldn't just vanish from his shop without any notice. And his other personas couldn't take over that part of his work for him. They did have their own 'lives' to take care of after all.

*I have to find some way to deal with this mess.* He sighed, running a hand through his hair as he glanced back towards the bedroom door. *I can't let everything fall apart like this…*

Nodding to himself, Yuui switched on the voice modulator and picked up his personal communicator. Switching it to an ID he rarely used, Yuui dialed The Company's reception.

"Thank you for calling The Company Reception. My name is Aria and I will be your personal dealer for the duration of this call. How can I be of service to you today?"

"This is Ashura Veda speaking," he said in a voice that was deeper and more cultured than Yuui's. "I would like to acquire the services of an entertainer for tomorrow."

"Please hold for a second, Mr. Veda, while I retrieve a list of your preferred entertainers," Aria said before he heard a beep and the line went silent. Already familiar with the routine, Yuui patiently waited for Aria to finish. Exactly five seconds later, a second beep announced Aria's return. "Thank you for your patience, Mr. Veda. You will be happy to learn that we have two of your preferred entertainers, 066 and 109, available for tomorrow. Which would you like for me to reserve?"

"109."

"Do you have any preference for the privacy packages?" Aria inquired. "Please note that the Exclusive package is now offered at an increment of 20% to the standard package. An additional 30% plus security will be required if you are interested in taking the entertainer off The Company premises. The entertainer will be equipped with a customized tracker that will allow us to monitor its behavior outside."

"The same as always," Yuui drawled.

"That would be the Exclusive package," Aria said and Yuui remained silent, knowing full well that Ashura's preference was registered on The Company's database. "What time should we be expecting you?"

"I should arrive sometime around nine."

"Very well, Mr. Veda. Thank you for doing business with The Company. We look forward to your visit."

Satisfied that his meeting had been arranged, Yuui didn't bother acknowledging her words. He disconnected the call and pulled the voice modulator from his throat. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he leaned back on the sofa with a tired sigh. *Looks like it's time for Ashura Veda to make an
appearance, he thought, not looking forward to triggering his transformation nanites.

Naba grabbed the glass vase off the table and flung it towards the holographic screen with a snarl. The vase passed harmlessly through the frozen projection and smashed to pieces the moment it hit the wall. Unsatisfied, Naba grabbed a second vase and flung it towards the screen. Like the previous projectile, the vase collided with the wall and shattered. Letting out a scream of frustration, Naba collapsed back into her armchair.

Breathing hard, she glared at the screen that showed her errant pet. She drank in the beautiful sight it presented, with blood flowing down 224's face, its expression twisted in agony. The rips in its upper torso that the Lupine had inflicted had yet to heal. The healers were supporting her slave, keeping the hybrid upright as the result was announced. Thinking about the way her slave had defied her made her fury return and she glowered at the frozen image.

*I warned you about the consequences of defying me, my pet. Even though I tried so hard to save you from this fate, I suppose my lesson did not sink in the way it was supposed to. No matter.* Naba smirked as she got to her feet and sauntered over to the screen. With a flick of her hand, she zoomed the image in on 224's blood splattered face. Still smirking, she reached up with one hand and slowly traced the holographic contours of its face. "You will learn what happens to slaves that defy their masters."

Titling her head to one side, Naba considered the projection for a moment. Her expression twisted into an ugly scowl as she narrowed her eyes. "The directors have put me on probation, and they've taken away 109. All because of that stunt you pulled. Do you know what I did to the last person who tried to take something away from me?" She paused, looking at the image for an answer that did not come.

That traitorous sympathizer that dared to call himself her brother had come to her all those months ago, asking her to release the Unnaturals she'd caught. The sentimental fool had tried to talk sense into her, had tried to bring her to his side when he was the one in the wrong all long. Naba had showed him, though. Just the way she had done with the monster disguised as her friend before that. They had all betrayed her, so she'd given them what they deserved. The monstrous bitch, now known as La Lupa, was locked away in the gladiator program. Even if it had managed to survive for three years, Naba was certain it would only be a matter of time before the Lupine got what it deserved for its betrayal.

Death was the only fate those traitors deserved. She'd made certain of that for her foolish brother when he had come begging to her. And she would make certain of it for Lupa as well.

Naba’s scowl deepened as seconds ticked by, a part of her still waiting for the image to reply. Finally she spoke, her voice dripping with venomous honey. "I killed him and left his corpse to rot in the wastelands. Now the moronic Liberalists are without their precious Steel," she spat. "If I didn't spare my own blood, what makes you think I won't destroy you? I might have liked you once, but I'm going to rip you apart and watch you burn."

"As fun as that revenge sounds," she heard Akira say behind her as she registered the sound of Akira's shoes clicking against the marbled floor. "I don't think killing 224 is the way to destroy it."

"How did you get in here?"

"The door was unlocked."
"No, it wasn't," Naba snapped.

"Probably not," Akira shrugged as she walked inside and sat down on the armchair Naba had been occupying. "224 doesn't seem to care much for its life. It could have escaped that day, but it chose to save a worthless clone instead."

"And you damaged it," Naba growled.

"I'm sorry?"

"You damaged 224!" Naba repeated, stomping up to Akira until she was towering over her.

"No, not really," Akira shrugged again.

"Then why is it stuttering?" she demanded.

"I was curious to see how keeping the neural pathways from reconnecting would affect a Hybrid like 224. It's nothing permanent." Akira waved her hand in a dismissive motion. "I introduced a blockage when I was taking samples of its brain tissue. All I need to do is drill another hole and remove the blockage and its Vampirosa healing will take care of the rest."

Crossing her arms, Naba continued to glower at her. "What do you want, Akira?"

"The same thing you do," Akira replied in a pleasant tone as she inclined her head. "For 224 to be in its proper place."

"What would you know about proper places?" Naba snarled.

"Not much, I'll admit," Akira acknowledged. "But I do know that the stunt 224 pulled was improper. Especially for an entertainer being trained by you." Naba bristled but Akira paid her no mind as she continued. "Now, I don't know about you, but reviewing the footage of his interaction with the breeder I lent you, I picked up on one of 224's weaknesses. If you're willing to listen to what I have in mind, we both might get what we want from 224 and you can deal with Lupa at the same time."

Naba considered the researcher with a critical eye, her expression slowly morphing into one of interest as she nodded.

"I'm listening."

Akira grinned.
Fai groaned, shivering in the cold air that blasted from the air ducts. It didn't help that he was covered in cold sweat. The lacerations covering his torso and face felt like they had been set on fire.

He had been brought to the medical bay and left propped up on a cot that was pushed against the wall. Fai had been in no state to question what they were planning on doing to him as he concentrated all his efforts on staying conscious. He had no idea how much time went by before Akira arrived. It could have been minutes or it could have had been several hours. All he had known before her arrival was that it hurt. It hurt to breath and it hurt to move. And yet, he did not expect to receive any sympathy from Akira as she methodically cleaned the gouges in his flesh.

"There hasn't been any change in your level of pain tolerance," Akira said as she dabbed a particularly deep wound with disinfectant, making Fai stiffen. She made a tutting sound and grabbed the disinfectant bottle, pouring a capful of the burning liquid over the wound. Fai inhaled sharply, holding his breath to keep from screaming and Akira's lips quirked around the corners. "I stand corrected."

"Get this over with," Fai grunted, clenching his hands into fists when Akira made no attempts to be gentle with the next wound.

"Do you know why you haven't been taken back to your room?" Akira asked as she discarded the dirty wad of cotton and grabbed a new piece to repeat the procedure.

"Could it be that I need medical attention?" he gasped, struggling to draw in a proper breath. His head spun and he was certain he would have fallen over by now had the wall not been keeping him upright.

Akira gave him a dry look as she cleaned out the cut just beneath his ribcage. Fai inhaled shakily, clenching his fists harder.

"Lupine teeth and claws are coated in a venom that inhibits healing in their prey until the virus contained in their saliva has infected the victim," Akira said after a while.

At that moment Fai hated the woman nearly as much as he had hated Fei Wang Reed. He had plenty of reasons to hate her, starting from the fact that she was the reason Syaoran was dead to the fact that every unnatural to ever pass through her care had probably been nothing more than a curious specimen. Even the way she treated him now was plenty of reason for Fai to hate her, but the reason why Fai hated her so much at that moment was that she was the only thing keeping him grounded.

The pain was growing worse with each passing moment and it was only the sound of her voice that allowed Fai to bite back his screams. The flat, clinical way with which she spoke to him was what helped him remember that he did not want to show her any weakness. And yet, as she dabbed away
at the cuts, a small whimper escaped his lips, and for that Fai hated her even more.

"The Lupine virus attacks the same genome set as the Vampirosa virus, so an infection from one species to the other is usually fatal. Although in certain rare cases, due to a genetic anomaly, there have been reports of an Unnatural surviving. Aren't you wondering why I'm telling you all of this?"

Because you're insane? Fai thought, clenching his jaw when Akira poured disinfectant on another wound. As if she had heard his thoughts, Akira smiled.

"I was curious to see what effect the virus would have on a rarity like you," she said, wiping away the blood from a gouge mark along his lowest rib. "The interesting thing about Lupines is that they're only harmful to others when transformed. I've given it plenty of time, but the virus hasn't shown any signs of taking." She frowned, putting a little more pressure on the wound than necessary, and Fai gasped. "I suppose a three-way Hybrid is not a possibility. Your body will be able to fight off the infection on its own."

"H-How l-long?" Fai asked, his voice shaking just as badly as his body. It hurts too much...

"Given your current state, I'm inclined to believe it will be quite a few hours," Akira said as she threw away the cotton and turned to face him. "I won't lie to you: the pain is only going to get worse while you heal, but I'm afraid I can't give you anything to counter that."

"Why?" he gasped, feeling his nails break the skin of his palms as the burning sensation grew worse.

"I want to study the process in its natural state," Akira shrugged as she put away everything save for a blood bag that she set on the table. "Painkillers would be an interference. Have the blood after you've healed. If you try before that, you'll only end up vomiting it back up." Turning on her heels, she marched out, leaving Fai propped up against the wall. Pausing just beyond the threshold, she turned back towards him. "By the way, I introduced a blockage in your brain when I took the tissue samples. I will be required to perform another surgery for you to go back to the way you were before. But I will only do that if you win the annual tournament." She turned and walked away.

Nausea bubbled up his throat, his insides twisting painfully and Fai failed to bite back a whimper. The world started to spin and he collapsed sideways. A part of him was aware that Akira was watching him but he couldn't bring himself to care. Everything burned.

The pain was not unlike what he had felt in Acid Tokyo when he had been turned into a vampire, but this time there was no Kurogane holding him down. He was being torn apart from the inside. Poison flowed through his veins, burning everything in its path. He was distantly aware of crashing into the floor when his thrashing toppled the cot over, of the way his head banged into the tiles, but he barely felt it. He was on fire and it burnt and- oh, Kerkés, it hurt!

A scream was ripped from his throat as the pain consumed him.

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The walls separating the dimensions were curious things. Strong enough to hold together the numerous existences, they intertwined and connected in an incomprehensible web of light and sound and magic. The walls between dimensions were strong yet flexible, allowing for movement between one existence and the other when aided by magic or technology. They were flexible, but not breakable. The proof of that was the failed wish of a magician who thought he could tear apart the walls and fashion a reality of his own liking.
Though not sentient in the sense that mattered to most, reality had a way of rectifying the factors that threatened its existence. And yet, the anomaly that currently existed in a world that was of no consequence in the greater scheme of things was sending out ripples through these walls made of light and sound and magic. Ripples that created echoes into the past and the future, blurring out the fine lines that separated them from the here and now. Ripples that upset the balance of existence.

Somewhere in the recesses of the mind of the anomaly, a bell tolled once. One more instance was marked down from the limited number of instances left before the destruction of the barriers as the spiderweb cracks that snaked across the surface of the walls spread a little wider.
Yuui walked through the main visitor's entrance at exactly five minutes to nine. His shoes squeaked against the polished marble as he strolled towards the receptionist's desk situated at the end farthest from the doors that led to the upper levels. Soft, velvet-covered sofas were placed at regular intervals around the reception area. Yuui spotted a snobby-looking couple occupying one a short ways away from the desk and another occupied by a potbellied man dressed in an expensive suit, though the buttons of his shirt appeared to be straining around his middle.

The couple sat together in stony silence, though the wife passed him a flirtatious smile when he looked their way. Yuui returned the smile, ignoring the husband's glare as he walked past them.

"Good morning, Mr. Veda," said the receptionist, a petite-looking woman wearing a name tag that stated her name as Violet. "We're very pleased to have you with us today."

"Of course," Yuui drawled, taking off his sunglasses and pocketing them.

"If you could please take a seat," Violet said, gesturing towards the sofa with her hand. "I will send for someone to take you to your room."

Yuui turned on his heel and made his way over to the sofa occupied by the couple.

"I hope you don't mind," he said as he welcomed himself to the sofa situated right across from the wife. "There appears to be a bit of a wait, and I couldn't help but notice that you looked a little..."

he paused to give the husband a fake smile, "bored."

"No, please, make yourself comfortable," the wife laughed, ignoring her husband's irritated look. "Hubert is here to make a purchase. We're in need of a new maid since the last one had a bit of an unfortunate accident. You know how it is with the pretty ones. They break so easily."

In simple words, the husband had used the last one as a plaything, and the wife killed it in a fit of jealousy. Now she'd come along to make sure the husband bought something uglier than her.

"Ah yes, I can imagine," Yuui inclined his head by just a fraction.

"Are you here to purchase something as well?" she asked.

"Afraid not. I'm here for some pleasure rather than business." He shrugged. "The entertainers here are some of the best on the market."

"Oh."

"The wife looked a little put out by that, but she quickly hid it behind another seductive smile. "I suppose training could amount for something, though I can never shake off the fear of what might happen should that training fail."

"The Company has some excellent preventive measures to ensure our security," Hubert piped up, seemingly resigning himself to putting up with Yuui's presence.

"Be that as it may," the wife said with a dismissive wave of her hand, "I still don't enjoy the thought of dirtying myself with a creature like that. No offense to you of course."
"None taken," Yuui replied graciously as he spotted a guide hurrying over in his direction. Nodding at them both, Yuui stood up and ran a hand down his finely tailored suit. "I'm afraid I'll be taking off now. Good luck making your purchase, Hubert. I hope you find something more robust this time. Ma'am."

"This way, Mr. Veda," the guide said, turning around to lead him towards the lifts. Yuui followed at a sedate pace, taking his time. The man led the way up to the Pleasure Program reception area where he logged Yuui in and showed him to his room. The guide paused outside the door and waited for Yuui to press his palm against the bio-scanning lock, the kind that could only be unlocked by a human and alerted the security when being accessed by Unnaturals. Yuui regarded him with a cool expression, quirking a brow until the man drew forward with a sheepish expression and unlocked the door, pulling it open for Yuui step through.

"Do remember to bring the feedback panel later," Yuui said, making a show of looking at his name-tag, "Gregory."

"Of course, Mr. Veda." Gregory paled, realizing that Yuui intended to complain against him. "My apologies. It's just that the procedure requires—"

"I am well aware of what the procedure is, Gregory," Yuui drawled. "But I have been coming here for years and not even once have I been insulted with the assumption that I'm not what I seem."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Veda, I was just—"

"You can explain that to your superiors," Yuui said as he walked past the man and shut the door in his face.

Turning around, he spotted 109 kneeling in the middle of the room, wearing a tiny silk dress that didn't leave much to imagination. A delicately styled tattoo spiraled around her creamy legs, creeping below the hem of her black dress. Yuui knew that it continued to her torso, wrapping around her waist and ending at the small of her back. Her hair was piled on top of her head in an intricate knot and her pale features were highlighted by blood red lips and smoky eyes.

She gazed up at him through thick lashes when she heard him approach, though she didn't stand. Yuui smirked at the way she shuddered when he trailed his fingers along the exposed skin of her back. Drawing away, he sauntered over to a couch that was set up next to the window, offering an excellent view of Cavahall's skyline.

"No need for such formality, Xing Huo," Yuui said, unbuttoning his coat as he sat down. Leaving it on, he leaned into the cushions as Xing Huo climbed to her feet, and approached him with a smile.

"It's so good to see you, Ashura," she murmured as she walked around the sofa and slipped her hands beneath the collar of his coat. An involuntary shudder raced down his spine when her cold fingers worked into his muscles through his shirt. "I've missed you."

"I'd be worried if you hadn't," he said, reaching up to grab her wrists. He pulled her around to the front before dropping her hands. "Would have meant that I'm losing my touch. Why don't you sit down and we can get down to business."

"What's the hurry?" Despite her words, Xing Huo did as he asked. She perched on the cushions next to him and folded her legs across the knees, exposing more of her tattooed skin. Her hand came to rest on his upper thigh as she leaned towards him, "I've been told that you have me until six. There will be plenty of time to talk."
Yuui grabbed her by the nape of her neck, drawing her near till their lips were almost brushing.

"You know how this works, Xing Huo," he whispered before pulling away. "I've heard rumors about a Hybrid coming into The Company's possession. What can you tell me about it?"

"224," Xing Huo said, undeterred by his lack of interest as she slipped sideways into his lap. Her nimble fingers loosened the knot on his tie before they began to work on the buttons of his shirt. "Mistress Naba was the one assigned as its trainer, but after it tried to escape during the first advanced training session, it was taken from the Mistress's care and transferred to the Gladiator Program. I'm not sure what has happened to it after that."

"And what of the time it spent under Naba?" Yuui pressed, running two fingers up and down the length of her exposed legs, slowly tracing the dark lines of her tattoo. Xing Huo drew in a shaky breath as his hand wandered upwards, stopping just shy of her dress's hemline. "How did 224 behave?" he asked, fiddling with the delicate lace that was sewn onto the dress.

"224... it… insisted on being called by a name," she answered, her words coming out in a hurried whisper as he resumed tracing the tattoo downwards.

"And what name was that?"

"Fai," she squeaked, her hands resting against his chest when his fingers changed their direction. "He said his name was Fai."

Fai... Mokona had told him how the wizard had gotten that name. There was no denying that this was his twin. Not that Yuui had any doubts after having seen the gladiator match the previous night. But Xing Huo's words were just more proof that this man who shared his brother's face was also, in a twisted sense, his brother.

"Did it say where it was from?" he asked, running his hands along her sides before moving to her back, feeling the ridges of her spine.

"No, I-I... never had the chance to— Ashura, please." She shuddered when he began tracing little circles around the small of her back where her tattoo ended. He smirked, running his hands along her sides before he brought them to the front and started drawing circles around her belly. He pretended not to notice the expression on her face.

"What about Strigoi?"

"Th-the gladiator?" she gasped.

"Yes," he drawled, enjoying the way she was coming undone, despite all her training. "I'm interested in buying that one. Any idea when it might be put up on the market?"

"I don't...I'm not privy to that information."

"Oh, come now, Xing Huo," he coaxed with his words as his hands wandered all over her body. "We both know that you have ways of getting the information I need. I don't come to you for the sex alone."

"Okay, f-fine..." She trembled under his ministrations. "Strigoi's handler doesn't have any plans of selling it yet. He plans to make use of it as a gladiator for at least one more season. There's talk going on that Strigoi will be grouped with La Lupa."

"So it will be in the final events then." Yuui nodded as he stopped touching her.
"Ashura," Xing Huo moaned in disappointment.

"And what of your Mistress?" Yuui said, ignoring the frustrated look on her face. "I can't imagine the directors being pleased with her."

"She is on probation." Xing Huo made an impatient noise and shifted around in his lap, straddling him. "And I have been fully inducted into the program," she added, resuming her earlier activity of unbuttoning his shirt.

"I'm curious, what do you think is likely to happen to 224?" He hummed in appreciation when her warm hands splayed across the taut muscles of his stomach. "Will it be put on the market? A Hybrid is sure to fetch a handsome price."

"They won't put 224 on sale," she shook her head before leaning closer. "Director Bia thinks he's better suited to the Gladiator Program."

"I see."

Disappointment flared in his chest. Even though he hadn't given any thought to what he might do if Yuui could meet him, a part of him had clung to the hope of seeing his twin in person. There wasn't any chance of that happening, now that the directors had made up their minds.

"Are you done with the initial round of questions?" she whispered against his cheek and Yuui shifted his focus onto her soft hands as they trailed down his torso and started fiddling with his belt. "You haven't come to see me in months and," she pulled away to meet his gaze, "I really meant it when I said that I've missed you. I know you come here for information, but you're the only one who doesn't make me feel like I'm being used."

"Attachments are a dangerous thing in this line of work, Xing Huo," Yuui warned her, circling an arm around her waist to draw her closer. He reached up with his other hand and started pulling away the beaded clips that held up her hair, letting them fall as her hair came tumbling down her shoulders.

"Attachments are all I have," she admitted with a sigh as he trailed light kisses along her collarbone and started slipping off the straps of her dress.

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Kurogane leaned against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, tuning out Nixon as he explained their plan to Tomoyo. He knew the details and had already agreed to it, though Nixon had insisted on bringing Tomoyo in on the plan as well.

It was risky as hell, but it was the best shot Kurogane had of getting to the mage. He'd already failed the kid, and he still had no idea where the manjuu was, but he knew about the idiot and he'd be damned if he let the magician suffer in that hell any longer than he had already. Besides, once Kurogane had gotten him out, the mage could probably cast a spell to track down the manjuu and they could leave that world for good.

"Give me one good reason why I should be endorsing this insanity," Tomoyo said, and Kurogane shrugged off his thoughts to pay attention. Tomoyo leveled a frigid glare at Kurogane, who stared back impassively.

"You gave me your word," he said in a level tone. The time he had spent in the Liberalists' captivity was enough for him to see this Tomoyo as someone completely different from his Tomoyo. Which was why seeing her glare at him didn't bother him.
"And he's more likely to succeed with us helping him," Nixon added. Kurogane had made him return his mechanical arm before coming to see Tomoyo. He had already made up his mind on going out by himself and carrying out the plan Nixon had come up with, even if Tomoyo refused to help.

"Even with us helping him," Tomoyo turned her glare towards Nixon, "there's no guarantee he'll survive the infection. Getting bitten by an Alpha has the lowest survival rate for humans."

"I know the risks. If the mage survived getting turned into a vampire, I can survive this too."

"What about learning control?" Tomoyo shot back. "Even the ones that survive need nearly an entire year to adjust to the change."

"I'll manage."

"This is suicidal." Tomoyo shook her head. "You can't just saunter into the final event and get your friend. You'll need a sympathizer to sponsor you and to sign you up, and you'd have to pass the qualifiers and... You'll get yourself killed before you can even find him."

"If you're done listing out the reasons, mind telling me if you're going to help me?"

"Help you?" Tomoyo gave an incredulous laugh. "Are you even listening to yourself? You expect me to help you convince an Alpha to sire you? Especially when there is no way in hell that can learn to control your Lupine abilities within two months. You want to rope in a sympathizer to sponsor you so that you can go on a suicide mission to track down your friend and use Nison's untested and experimental range delimiters that might not even work. All in the hopes that your friend might be in any state to cast a teleportation spell to bring you both here. Did I leave anything out?"

"Look, either you can keep your word or I can walk out of here and do something on my own," Kurogane said, breathing deeply to keep his temper in check.

"Tommy, we're the only ones who can help him," Nixon added. Tomoyo looked like she wanted to say something harsh but seemed to physically reign in her anger.

"Suppose I agree," she said, beginning to pace around the room, "how are you going to explain that he looks just like Steel? His face is well known around Cavahall. The Company would suspect our involvement the moment they see him."

"I did consider that." Nixon nodded. "I was thinking that maybe..." He paused, glancing towards Kurogane with hesitance and started fiddling with his fingers. It was something that Kurogane had come to recognize as a nervous tick.

"Oh for the love of... I've agreed to turn into a fucking werewolf," Kurogane snapped. "Whatever else you've got planned, it can't be worse. "I'm not going to like this, but..."

"His eyes will change anyway, but I was thinking that Masooma could cast a spell to alter his appearance," Nixon said, hurriedly continuing when Tomoyo looked like she was about to interrupt. "Nothing major but maybe just enough so that people don't immediately assume he's Steel."

Kurogane felt everything come to a halt around him. Nixon's words replayed inside his head. He wasn't vain in any sense of the word. Not by a long shot. Yet the thought of changing his face bothered him a lot more than it should have. Sure, it wasn't as big as turning into a werewolf to save the idiot but... changing his face after turning into something that wasn't even human.
was...daunting. It almost felt like losing who he was.

"And how will his friend recognize him?" Tomoyo was asking and Kurogane shrugged off his doubts. They were using magic to change the way he looked. If it ended up bothering him that much, he could ask the witch or the mage to change him back.

"He could just go up to him and talk," Nixon shrugged. "So long as he doesn't try it in the middle of a death match, there's a good chance Fai will listen. But that all depends on whether or not Kurogane is willing to go through with it since, the change has to be physical. I considered having a glamour done since it's easier to reverse, but the Cerellium compounds might disrupt the spell."

"This is the only way that you can think of?" Kurogane asked.

"Well, there's the option for surgery too," Nixon said with another shrug, "but that would take longer. Not to mention it'll be harder to reverse once you're a Lupine since they scar like crazy. You'd be better off without it."

"Yeah, magic would be easier to deal with." Kurogane nodded. His hesitation must have shown on his face, since Tomoyo gave him an understanding look, surprising Kurogane with the sudden lack of hostility. What changed her mind?

"Who are you going to ask to sire him?" Tomoyo stopped pacing and pulled up a chair next to Nixon. "There are no Alphas with the Liberalists, and infection by a regular Lupine would take even longer for him to master control."

"Touya might be willing to help out," Nixon said after a long pause and Kurogane's eyebrows shot up in surprise. How many alternates does this world have? Tomoyo, me, and now the king of Clow.

"I suppose," Tomoyo frowned, "but it won't be easy to convince him."

"He's a complete bastard," Nixon agreed. "And he's not above taking advantage of us when he thinks it might help him gain power, but he won't pass up a chance like this."

"How long will it take?" Kurogane pushed away from the wall and drew up a chair next to Tomoyo. He was beginning to feel restless.

Tomoyo had not given her approval out loud but the very fact that she had started offering her opinion on the plan was proof enough that they had convinced her. Though he had claimed he'd rescue the mage on his own, having the Liberalists helping him would make it easier and increase their chances of survival.

"Well... convincing him shouldn't take more than a week," Nixon counted, "but there's still a fortnight till the full moon, which is when Touya believes he can create his strongest Lupines since the moon supposedly lends them strength. So two weeks till you're infected and we'll use all the time after that getting you set up to enter the annuals and used to the Lupine physiology."

"What about the manjuu and my sword?"

"There's no sign of either yet," Nixon said, looking apologetic as he summoned two holographic interfaces and began to manipulate them. "I've heard of an antiquities and exotic goods dealer in the city who might be able to help, though he's very particular about who he deals with so the earliest we can meet with him will be after you're turned. I've sent him a message though so let's hope he agrees to meet us sooner."

"Have Fuuma get in touch with Touya as well," Tomoyo reminded him. "He has an open invitation
with the Scavengers, so he's probably in the best position to convince Touya. Also, I can't imagine him taking it well if you were the one to do the talking."

*The treasure hunter? That's four alternates so far. I wonder if I might see the princess or the vampire hunter as well...*

"It's not my fault he's an irritating asshole," Nixon grumbled, even as he complied and Kurogane prepared himself to greet another familiar face.

Chapter End Notes

If you enjoyed the chapter, don’t forget to drop me a comment. I've got most of the plot figured out and I know where I want to go with this in a broad sense but I'd still love to know your opinions on these characters and what you think might happen next.
It took every ounce of willpower Fai possessed to keep his feet moving as he followed Kyle out of the medical bay. Having crossed the line of exhaustion hours ago, his mind could no longer comprehend what was going on around him. His muscles screamed at him to stop, but Fai focused all of his attention on the simple task of putting one foot in front of the other. His thoughts had gone silent quite some time back, his brain refusing to register anything that Kyle said.

"—not worth this much trouble—" Kyle said as they reached the small flight of stairs leading to the upper level of the basement. Fai paused at the bottom, staring at the rising steps in confusion before the higher functions of his brain kicked in and he remembered he was supposed to climb them. As soon as the action became clear, his mind went back to autopilot, letting the sound of Kyle's voice wash over him. "—I swear that woman is obsessed. First Lupa, now you? I already have my hands full dealing with one object of Naba's obsession. I don't like the idea of finding out how crazy she might get when I have you under me as well. You made it into the Gladiator Program. It's only a matter of time before she decides you've insulted her."

Fai stumbled as he lifted his foot for the next step and set it down, losing his balance for a moment when the floor stayed at the same level instead of rising. The stairs ended... his mind supplied in a moment of clarity before sliding back into the haze. Kyle continued to speak. "I did not sign up for all the hassle that'd come along with handling someone like you. Naba will be looking for revenge and I have no interest in finding out what she might have planned for you. I'm only working here because the money is good."

"You always did like things easy," a dark-haired man spoke. Failing to realize that Kyle had stopped at the sight of this man, Fai bumped into his back only to be shoved away. "Imbecile," Kyle spat as Fai stumbled into the wall, losing his balance and falling to the floor. "Did Lupa's venom destroy your brain? Use that thing in your thick skull and learn your place before I'm forced to teach it to you."

Fai blinked, staring up at his handler in confusion before his attention was drawn to the person standing next to Kyle. I know him...

"So this is what you've brought me," the dark-haired man said, crouching next to Fai as he grabbed his chin and made him meet his gaze. Partially hidden behind a pair of spectacles, the two matching brown eyes looked strange in that face, as Fai was more used to seeing a glass eye in the right socket. "I have to admit, the Berserker looked a lot more impressive on screen than it does in person."

The man let go of Fai and stood up. "It just finished recovering from Lupa's venom, Seishirou," Kyle replied and Fai blinked. The vampire hunter, his brain informed him as he tried to put the name together with the face before him. "No wonder it looks so pathetic," Seishirou drawled. "How about you get back on your feet now, Berserker?"

Who is that? He wondered, feeling oddly disconnected from his body as he remained on the floor. "He means you, up," Kyle snapped, and Fai blinked sluggishly. He struggled to obey the
command, his body feeling heavy and constrained, as if trapped in molasses. He put his hands on
the floor, pushing against it as he tried to get his body into an upright position. His arms gave out
halfway through, and he fell on his face. The taste of blood filled his mouth as he bit his tongue.
He swallowed thickly, putting his arms back under him as he tried once again to stand, only to have
his limbs give out once more.

"Well, at least it's resilient," he heard Seishirou say as callused fingers wrapped around his bicep
and pulled. Fai swayed on his feet when he finally managed to stand up, and the hand tightened its
grip around his arm.

"Enjoy dealing with it and Naba," Kyle said as he turned on his heels and left.

Fai blinked, watching his handler's retreating back in confusion.

"Come along now, Berserker," Seishirou said, tugging at his arm. Fai complied, following after the
man. "Kyle has passed on the mantle of being your handler to me, and I believe you need some rest
before you can be of any use. My other charge has an alliance with the creature responsible for
your current state, and depending on how the directors feel about it, you may be allied with La
Lupa for the final events as well. But for now, you will be partnered with Strigoi, whom you will
meet with shortly.

"I will be pitting you two against each other to assess your compatibility levels and the amount of
effort I will need to put in to get you in good enough shape," he said, though his words sounded
distant and incomprehensible to Fai. A part of Fai knew that he might get in trouble for not
listening, later on, but that voice was silenced by the exhaustion weighing on his mind and body.
All Fai wanted to do was close his eyes right where he was and sleep. He was so tired… "The
matches leading up to the annual events are important for getting you publicity and I intend to take
full advantage of that."

A door was pulled open and Fai found himself being led inside. Seishirou made him sit on the bed
just as Fai's eyes began to droop.

"I'll come to pick you up in three hours for your introduction to Strigoi," was the last thing Fai
heard as sleep claimed him.

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Syaoran lay on his bed with his head resting on the palms of his interlaced hands. He stared at the
ceiling, lips pulled down in a contemplative frown as the orange glow of the sun climbed up the
shredded wallpaper across from the window. His brow furrowed in confusion as he pulled his right
hand from behind his head and brought it up to his eye level.

His meeting with Meiling the previous night had been awkward and uncomfortable. She had flung
her arms around him the moment she had seen him at the door, completely ignoring Touya, who
had been right behind him. Syaoran had stood there awkwardly for a moment before gingerly
wrapping an arm around her waist while he patted her back with his free hand.

Meiling had spent nearly five minutes in the doorway, sobbing into his shirt before she had pulled
away and invited them inside. Refusing to meet either of their gazes, she had shown them to the
living room and rushed into the kitchenette to put on some tea. Touya had kept a steady stream of
conversation going while he was there, not appearing discouraged by the lack of proper responses
from either Syaoran or Meiling.

Syaoran had spent the time sneaking glances at Meiling, trying to recall something, anything about
her. From what Touya had told him, he'd been in love with her. There had to be something about her that he could remember. Meiling, for her part, hadn't looked in Syaoran's direction for the rest of the night, and Syaoran could only wonder why. Had they fought before the cave in at the mines, perhaps? Or was there something else?

Thankfully, his thoughts had silenced in his sleep, though he had woken shortly before sunrise and lay awake in bed, trying to work out the puzzle created by his amnesia and Meiling's behavior. Staring at his fingers, he wondered if perhaps talking to Meiling about whatever had happened might help. He didn't remember her, but she clearly knew him. There had to be something she could tell him that might help.

Syaoran let his hand drop to his side with a heavy sigh as he stared at the claw marks on the windowsill. He wasn't sure how he knew he had caused them or why- since Meiling never said- but his gut told him that he had been the one to do it. But there were no memories to accompany that feeling.

The sun climbed higher across the sky and the orange glow faded away as the gunmetal grey clouds concealed it. Syaoran sighed again, shifting on his side as his mind failed to produce any memories. Breathing deeply through his nose, he tried out a meditation technique that he did remember. Closing his eyes, he stretched out his senses, feeling Meiling's presence in the next room. She was asleep; he could tell from the slow, steady thumping of her heart. He tried to synchronize his own breathing with hers, focusing on the sound of her heartbeat as he reached back into his mind, trying to fill the gaps in his memory.

He wasn't sure how long he spent meditating, but he was drawn out of his thoughts when a new heartbeat joined the soothing sound of Meiling's. Syaoran's eyes shot open as he sat upright when the newcomer knocked at the front door. Meiling stirred at the sound and Syaoran wondered if he should go see who it was, if only to let her sleep a little longer. A couple of seconds passed in indecision during which the visitor knocked once more. Meiling woke before Syaoran could get to his feet and he stayed put, curious to see how she normally behaved with people.

"Touya," she exclaimed, sounding surprised as she pulled open the front door. "Good morning. You're a little early."

"Good morning," Touya greeted in a pleasant voice. "I had to meet with a client today. I thought I'd invite Syaoran along to see how things work. Is he awake yet?"

"I'm not sure," Meiling said, her tone suddenly subdued. "How about you come in? His room is this way." Syaoran heard their footsteps approach his room before Meiling knocked. "Syaoran? Touya is here, are you up?"

"Yes," he said, getting to his feet and reaching for the t-shirt he had discarded the previous night. Pulling it over his head, he opened the door, coming face to face with a grinning Touya.

"How are you feeling, kid?" Touya asked as he invited himself in. Behind him, Meiling mumbled an excuse about cleaning up and turned away. Syaoran watched her retreating back with a small frown. "Give her some time," Touya said, placing a hand on his shoulder before maneuvering him back into the room. "You know how women can be."

_Not really_, Syaoran thought but decided against voicing that out loud. "I guess."

"She'll come around," Touya assured him as he sat down on Syaoran's bed. "Now, tell me, how do you feel about coming along to visit a client? You probably don't remember, but you'd asked to accompany me the next time I went."
"I did?" His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Why else would I be here?"

"But… I don't know anything about what you do or who you're meeting with. Or what I wanted to see when I asked you," Syaoran explained, feeling flustered in the face of Touya's expectations.

"That's okay, you can relearn it." Touya waved his hand dismissively as he stood up. Checking his watch, he started towards the door. "You only have five minutes before we have to be there."

"F-Five minutes?" Syaoran gasped.

"Yeah, Souma will be here to pick us up in three. Better hurry."

Syaoran stood there with a dumbfounded look on his face for a moment before he snapped into action, using vampire speed to sort through his closet and grab a fresh outfit. Quickly changing into it, he rushed to the bathroom to splash some water on his face and run a comb through his unruly hair.

He returned from the bathroom in record time. He glanced towards Meiling's closed door, helplessness and confusion welling up inside his chest as he turned away. Touya gave him an understanding look as he approached. Before either of them could say anything, there was another knock on the front door before Souma stepped inside.

"Syaoran, it's good to see you are doing well," she said, offering him a tiny smile before turning to Touya, her features going cold as she held out her hands to them both. "Shall we?"

She looks upset, Syaoran observed, taking her right hand. 'You know how women can be.' Touya's words from earlier made a little more sense. He wasn't just talking about them in general.

Syaoran's gaze shot towards Souma in surprise when a cooling sensation built up from where his hand touched Souma's and spread out towards the rest of his body. Her face became obscured by a cloud of black smoke that soon cut off his view of the entire room. Moments later the cloud dissipated and Syaoran found himself in an entirely new place.

"-has been arranged for Mr. Ryaanban," he heard a woman speak. Syaoran's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Touya held a finger to his lips. Syaoran nodded, understanding the need to stay silent even if he didn't know why. "The guards have been informed and Mr. Ryaanban will be removed from the premises shortly. I have also informed the directors to put forth their choices for the new head of security by this evening, as you instructed, Ma'am."

"That will be all, Grace," a second woman spoke, this one with a voice that was cold and held a trace of arrogance and superiority. "I don't want to be disturbed for the next two hours, so clear my schedule and let the other directors know."

"Yes Director Bia," Grace replied and Syaoran heard her footsteps recede. The door hissed and a lock clicked into place before Touya stepped out of the shadows. Souma followed a step behind him and Syaoran took that as his cue to do the same.

"I don't really like being made to wait, Bia," Touya said in a lazy drawl that somehow managed to convey his impatience. Without waiting for an invitation, he sauntered across the plush carpet and sat down on the leather sofa placed near the director's desk. Throwing his arms across the back, Touya put his feet on the coffee table and turned his head towards the silver-haired woman with a wicked grin. Souma took up a place directly behind Touya and Syaoran decided to stand next to
Syaoran saw a flash of anger cross Bia's black eyes for a moment, though it was gone the next as Bia returned Touya's grin with a look of cool indifference. She took her time to arrange and collapse the numerous holographic displays hovering above her desktop before turning her attention to Touya with a fake smile. Syaoran watched them both closely as Touya's grin shifted to a scowl. Bia slowly walked around the desk and came to sit in the armchair across from them.

"My apologies for wasting your precious time, Touya," she said in the same tone she'd used with Grace. "I should have realized that a mutt such as yourself clearly has better things to do."

"Unlike the rest of the bastards trapped inside this shithole," Touya growled, all traces of playfulness gone from his features. It took Syaoran a moment to rein in his surprise. He hadn't expected the man to lose his temper so quickly, "this mutt can actually bite, so I'd be a little careful if I were you."

"And I would be a little more careful to not threaten a director at The Company, if I were you, Touya," Bia countered as she leaned forward, her face set in a stony expression. "Accidents tend to happen with creatures—oh sorry, excuse me, with people in your position."

Touya gave a cold laugh and his tone took on a mocking edge when he spoke. "Now, now, Bia, threatening your guests won't really work out in The Company's favor. You don't want The Company to lose its sole Cerellium supplier."

"I may be tolerating your little charade of control over our supplies," Bia replied and Syaoran detected a hint of anger in her voice. They both really hate each other. "But don't forget that we can have the mines back in our possession within the hour."

"Is that so?" Touya challenged and Syaoran stared at the back of his head as he wondered why his old self might have been so interested in watching a power play of this kind. "Then why haven't you done it already? Oh wait, now I remember. You can't. There is no way your henchmen would be able to secure the mines before they blow up." Touya gave another mocking laugh. "The range limiters that your men stuck in the miners are working wonderfully in my favor. They are all set to go off in an hour's time if I don't return to deactivate them. And of course, should something happen to me, they will go off automatically. Tell me, Director, how long would it take for The Company to excavate the tunnels to reach the reserves? Or to arrange a big enough workforce to get it all up and running again?"

*He rigged the nanites to kill the Scavengers if The Company tries a takeover.* A chill raced down Syaoran's spine at the realization, and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from protesting. He was there to observe the meeting. Despite Touya's fondness of him, Syaoran had little doubt that Touya would not take kindly to being questioned in front of Bia.

"You claim that we are monsters, but what does that make you, mutt?" Bia quirked a brow as her stony mask cracked and a look of amusement replaced it. "You would kill your own just to protect your position. I must say that I'm impressed by your resolve. If it weren't for your rather unfortunate origins, I might have offered you an official position with us."

Touya growled as he jumped to his feet, the muscles rippling along his back as he began to transform. Syaoran risked a glance in Souma's direction and saw that she too was glaring at Bia, making no moves to stop Touya.

"The Scavengers would rather die than go back to being your slaves," Touya snarled, slowly advancing on Bia.
"Did I touch a nerve?" Bia smirked and leaned back in the armchair, crossing her legs. "You don't have to worry, though. The Company has standards to maintain. Now be a good mutt and sit." She ignored Touya's warning growl and continued. "I'd like to be finished here as soon as possible. I have to evaluate Lupa's match against 224. It revels in shedding blood just as much as the Alpha that infected it, but I have to admit, I'm a little disappointed by yesterday's performance. On the other hand, your sire seems to have held itself admirably against Lupa, 504."

224 sired me? Syaoran held his tongue, not wanting to let Bia know about his lack of memories. He had been told by Touya about his captivity at The Company before he had managed to escape and find sanctuary with the Scavengers. Syaoran didn't think there was a way to get the man out of there, but he wondered if he could somehow get in touch with him.

There was a possibility that 224 knew something about his mysterious past that the Scavengers didn't. Maybe if he couldn't recover his memories in the near future, Syaoran could talk to Touya and have a meeting arranged. Despite their obvious loathing for each other, Bia appeared to give Touya a lot of leeway.

His attention was drawn away from his thoughts when Bia continued to speak. "And really Touya," she said, fixing her gaze on the Lupine, "learn to control your kleptomaniac tendencies. Stealing The Company's property is pushing the limits of my tolerance."

"Scavengers don't belong to The Company," Touya replied as he sat back on the sofa, legs once more resting on the table. Unlike before, however, he remained in his lupine form so his words were more of a growl. "Now, if you're done with the chitchat, perhaps we can discuss business."

"No matter how many times you increase the interest rates," Bia shook her head, before drawing up a few holographic projections with a flick of her hand, "you won't be able to buy Lupa's freedom. She isn't even up for sale. Plus, ten percent is simply too much."

"Your demand for Cerellium has gone up by five percent within the past two months," Touya said, pretending as if he hadn't heard the first part. "It's only fair that the price should go up as well."

"Perhaps," Bia steepled her fingers as she leaned towards Touya with a smirk, "but if we're talking about fairness, then there's something I would like from you."

"Syaoran is a part of the family, so don't even think about trying to reclaim him," Touya interrupted before Bia could speak further and Syaoran felt a surge of gratitude towards the Lupine. At least he didn't intend on returning him to the place that had driven him mad before.

"Not even if I agree to give you Lupa in exchange?" Bia's smirk widened and Syaoran's eyes shot to Touya in panic. Touya for his part, stared back at Bia, stone-faced, dragging out the silence and doing nothing to alleviate Syaoran's worry. He wouldn't agree, would he?

"I thought I made it clear to you," Touya finally growled, leaning towards Bia with his teeth bared. "Syaoran is a Scavenger, and Scavengers are not up for trade."

"No, of course not," Bia conceded and Syaoran thought she looked a little disappointed. "You did make it clear how important family is to you. Speaking of which, how is your little sister doing these days?" Touya's back went ramrod straight and the sound that issued from his throat was unrecognizable as human.

"Careful, Director, or The Company could soon be looking to replace you," Souma advised as she stepped between her and Touya, the latter looking just about ready to rip her apart.
"My apologies," Bia said, not sounding sorry at all as she turned her attention to the holographic projections hovering in the air before her, "I didn't realize the little she-mutt's fate was still a sore subject. Now, about that next Cerellium shipment..."

Yuui shook out the rain from his dark hair as he entered the restaurant, brushing stray droplets from his shoulders as he scanned his dimly lit surroundings. Soft, instrumental music played in the background, setting a pleasant ambiance. It took him a moment to spot the man Ashura Veda had come to meet. He had chosen a table in a comparatively dark corner that offered a clear view of all the entrances and exits to the room.

Yuui took a moment to regard the impeccably-dressed young man before making his way over to the chosen table. His posture appeared relaxed, but the way his green eyes kept searching his surroundings every few seconds belied his nervousness. Yuui pulled up a seat and sat across from the man, offering him a congenial smile.

"Did you have to wait long?" Yuui asked as he motioned for a waiter to bring them the menus. "I was a little held up."

"No, it's fine." The man shook his head, watching the waiter with wary eyes as he set down the menus and stepped back. "You got here earlier than I expected," the man said, once again glancing around the restaurant before fixing his gaze on Yuui.

"I try not to be late for important meetings." Yuui shrugged and gestured towards the menu laid out on the table in front of him. "I'd recommend you try the steak. It's one of my favorites here."

"I didn't come to try out the food, Mr. Veda," the man replied.

"I am well aware of that." Yuui nodded, ignoring the man's impatient tone. "But appearances need to be kept up. Do try the steak, I insist."

The man looked like he was about to protest, but gave in with a sigh as he picked up the menu and rattled off a few things without paying much attention to what he was ordering. Yuui on the other hand, took his time placing his order as he pretended to scan the menu.

"I hope you have something for me to work with," the man said once the waiter had left. "I can't afford to waste time like this. Not when my brother is in that place."

"You can afford to sit down and have a meal, friend. I'm quite certain your brother won't hold that against you."

"Do you know anything that might help us or not?"

"That really depends on what you are willing to pay for his freedom." Yuui shrugged and watched with a hint of amusement as the other man's brows shot up in surprise before he hid it behind a cold facade.

"I didn't know that sympathizers used the plight of our kind as an opportunity to make money."

"A man has got to eat, doesn't he? Although, in this case, I'm afraid you misunderstood me." He grinned. "I'm not going to ask you for anything in return for the information I provide. It's the one that can help you break out your brother that's going to demand payment."

"I am already aware that I have to deposit the money before I can buy him at the auction. Get to the
point."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Your brother isn't going to be auctioned off. The only time you can get to
him is during the annuals."

"The nanites will kill him the moment he sets foot outside of the arena."

"Not if you can pay the price the price for his freedom. Now, tell me, have you heard of *The
Wishing Shop*?"
Fai ducked under the punch aimed for his head, swiping out with his claws to slice into his opponent's forearm before retreating. The man let out a pained cry as he cradled his arm, nursing the injury for a moment before glaring at Fai. A visible aura of darkness gathered around him before forming the shape of a lance that shot in Fai's direction, and Fai easily side-stepped the attack.

The man snarled as he gathered more of the dark energy and sent another attack hurtling at him. Fai could hear Primera keeping up a lively commentary in the background, though he didn't pay her much mind. The three-on-three tag-team match was being broadcast live, according to Seishirou. Though any member of the team could get their opponent to surrender and win the match for the whole team, Seishirou had specifically instructed Fai to be the one to gain the victory.

Since Seishirou had done so in front of his partners, they were both currently leaning against the arena perimeter, refraining from entering the match at all even though his opponents had switched places twice already. Fai tried to not let that bother him. After all, given their first encounters, it was probably for the best that both his partners were currently ignoring him. Lupa had tried to shred him, and Strigoi hadn't been too pleased to see Fai when they had first met two weeks ago.

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"Strigoi has been with me since the beginning of this year," Seishirou told Fai as he opened the door to the practice room. "You will be fighting it until one of you is either unable to continue or gets knocked out. The footage for your match with Lupa will be enough that you won't have to fight it again, but I will use this match to assess how well you can work with Strigoi."

Fai glanced around the room, his gaze falling on the dark-haired man leaning against the perimeter marker of the practice arena with his arms crossed. It took a moment for Fai's exhausted mind to recognize Strigoi for who he really was. It was the strange tug at the back of his senses, the sudden awareness of Strigoi's presence that he had only ever felt around one other person. Why is Kamui here? A tiny voice questioned inside his head as he gaped at the vampire. He looked younger than the Kamui he had met, but Fai knew that this was the vampire that had turned him. The ability to identify the presence of their sire was something of an instinct inherent to all vampires, and Fai doubted that the instinct would flare up in the presence of an alternate version. Judging from the glare Kamui appeared to be directing at him, though, he didn't seem to have recognized Fai. What is going on?

Seishirou directed Fai into the practice arena through a little opening in the fence, though Kamui vaulted over the metal bars with ease. He pounced as soon as Seishirou signaled the beginning of the match, clawed hands aimed for Fai's throat, and Fai barely managed to block the hit, grunting at the force behind the blow. Adrenaline flooded his veins, jolting his mind to wakefulness.

"You have my blood," Kamui hissed as his irises turned cat-like. "Why are you still alive?"

"Kamui-kun, what are you-" Fai began, blocking another swipe aimed for his throat before Kamui dropped to the ground and knocked Fai's legs from under him.

"How do you know that name?" He snarled, grabbing Fai by the throat. "Are you the handler's pet?"
"No," Fai gasped, kicking out with his legs to throw Kamui off him. "We met before, in Tokyo. Don't you r-r-remember me?"

"Tokyo doesn't exist anymore," Kamui snapped as he flipped in mid-air, landing on his feet only to shoot towards Fai again. "How did Akira create you? My stolen blood doesn't have the sanity hormone. Why aren't you dead?"

Why doesn't he remember me? Fai frowned as he blocked another blow, unwilling to go on the offensive against his sire before he could figure out what was going on. He looks so different now. And he's fighting differently too. His moves aren't as graceful as they were in Tokyo.

Kamui snarled in frustration as Fai continued dodging and blocking his attacks, and it suddenly dawned on him as to why his sire was so different. He's younger now than when we first met. The revelation took him so much by surprise that he got his throat nicked by Kamui's claws. Blood trickled down his neck, and Kamui grinned in triumph even as the wound healed.

"Stop," Seishirou's voice rang in the arena as he walked inside. Kamui leveled a glare towards the man, showing signs of attacking Fai regardless of the orders when Seishirou continued. "Stand down, Strigoi. If you attack it now, I will be forced to discipline you for disobeying a direct order."

Kamui gave him a look of pure loathing, but did as Seishirou asked.

"Now, I've been watching you fight, Berserker," Seishirou said, exposing his back to Kamui as he came to stand in front of Fai. "I couldn't help but notice something, and I'd like for you to explain it to me. Why aren't you fighting back?"

Fai said nothing, knowing it would do more him harm than good to tell the truth. But as the silence dragged on, a familiar gleam entered Seishirou's eyes. They're both the same...Fai realized with a jolt. This isn't a random alternate version of the vampire hunter. This is the vampire hunter.

"Answer the question, Berserker, or I will be forced to make you." Seishirou's tone remained pleasant, but Fai knew that it wasn't a request.

"I didn't want to antagonize my teammate," Fai replied, matching Seishirou's pleasant demeanor as his mind worked furiously to piece together what he had just discovered. "H-he appears to dislike me as it is. I didn't think h-he would take kindly to me beating h-him."

"It, Berserker," Seishirou corrected, seemingly satisfied with the answer Fai had provided. "Unnaturals are not human, therefore we don't use he or she when talking about your kind."

Seishirou is human, Fai noticed to his great confusion. He wasn't sure how it had happened because the Seishirou he had met on journey had been a vampire and there was no way to reverse vampirism. Yet this Seishirou, who Fai was certain was the vampire hunter he knew, was a normal human.

"Don't worry about forging a friendship with Strigoi," Seishirou told him as he turned and started to walk away. They're both younger than the people I know. Am I... meeting them before they even left on their journeys? "It hates everyone. Now start again, and this time I want you to fight back."

Fai parried his opponent's strike and threw him away with a spinning kick, gracefully landing on his feet. He let the man switch with his partner, taking the time to observe Lupa and Kamui, who stood off to one side. Neither gave any indication of wanting to switch places with him, not that Fai had any intention of tagging out. It was ridiculously easy to beat his current opponents. The only
reason the match had dragged on so long was because Seishirou wouldn't be happy with the fight ending before it had even begun. So he had toyed with his opponents instead.

Fai felt sorry for humiliating the three men, one of whom was an alternate version of an archer from Yama. But Fai knew he had to be careful. He had refused to let Naba control him. Because of that, he was stuck in a place where he was expected to fight to keep his life. If he pushed Seishirou too much, who knew where he would end up next? Or if he'd be in a position to fulfill the promise he had made to Syaoran.

Fai conjured a magical shield to block the blades of ice his next opponent sent at him. He was still having trouble casting complex spells, and even the simple ones began to slip from his control after half a minute. But half a minute was more than enough for Fai to knock out the unnatural. He used a burst of vampire speed to get behind the man and jab at a pressure point at the base of his neck. The man crumpled in a limbless heap. Fai let the shield dissipate as the bell rang, signaling the end of the match.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Primera announced as she descended from the observation deck and walked over to Fai. Taking hold of his arm, she raised it above his head with a grin before continuing. "I give you the victor of tonight's tag team match: Berserker!"

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Fai sat at a secluded table in the cafeteria, playing around with the bowl of tasteless sludge he'd gotten for dinner that night. The plastic bag of blood lay next to it on the linoleum tabletop, but Fai planned on using the blood to wash away the unpleasant feeling left behind by the food on its way down.

"Four wins in two weeks," Roy laughed as he dropped his tray across from Fai and sat down, giving him a jovial grin. "Not bad for a newbie. Not bad at all."

Fai returned the smile, letting go of the spoon. "You're doing r-r-rather well yourself, I h-heard."

"Three wins so far." Roy shrugged. "Next one isn't for another four days. It's a pity you were put with Strigoi and Lupa. I can't imagine it's easy, working with the king and queen of stuck-ups."

"They're okay." Fai shrugged and started playing with the food again.

"I'll take your word for it," Roy chuckled. "Stirring your spoon in that thing isn't magically going to alter the taste, you know."

Fai froze where he was before looking at Roy. "Say that again," he demanded.

"I'll take your word for it?"

"No, the other part."

"Magically alter the taste?" Roy repeated, giving Fai a dubious look.

"But I can." Fai grinned, tracing out a series of runes around his bowl. It glowed blue momentarily before a pleasant aroma rose from the bowl. He sighed. "I guess it can't h-h-help the way it l-l-looks."

"You have got to be kidding me," Roy said, eyes wide with disbelief as he pulled the sludge towards him. "Will it taste as good as it smells? Because I'm telling you, I'll hand over my title as victor of the finals to you right now if you promise to keep doing this." Closing his eyes, he inhaled
deeply. "Oh, this reminds me of home."

"You'll need to win the final event in order for you to hand over the title to me," Fai chuckled as he cast the same spell on Roy's dinner.

Roy dug in, his eyes growing wide in surprise. "If I close my eyes, I can almost pretend I'm eating Riza's cooking. The texture is still a little goopy, but damn… why didn't you do this from the start?"

"I didn't think of it until now." Fai shrugged, digging into the sludge that could finally pass for food.

"It's a good thing you've got me then." Roy grinned. "I've decided to name you my mealtime buddy. From now on, you, my friend, have been assigned the glorious task of turning this sludge into something edible."

"Of course," Fai nodded, catching a glance of Lupa and Kamui as they entered the cafeteria together. The other gladiators gave them a wide berth as they made their way towards the food stands and collected their dinner. Lupa's gaze drifted towards the empty table next to Fai's and for a moment he thought she might head over, but then she appeared to notice Fai and turned away with a scowl. She followed Kamui towards the other end of the hall and sat down.

"I'd stop thinking about her if I were you," Roy said after chewing and swallowing a mouthful of the food. "Getting involved with her is a bad idea. Kyle shows no intention of letting her go, and she's got Naba against her too. Plus there's all the added drama of her being not quite right in the head, if you know what I mean."

"What makes you think I'd want anything to do with her?" Fai quirked a brow as he started on his dinner.

"You're joking, right?" Roy's tone did nothing to hide his incredulity. "I saw the way you looked at her just now, and I'm telling you, she is a bad idea with a capital 'b'. There are plenty of other attractive gladiators in this place if you're into that kind of thing. But stay away from Lupa if you're smart. I mean, she tried ripping you to shreds the first time she met you."

"I'll try to remember that in my pursuit of L-L-Lupa," Fai said dryly.

"Mark my words, you're going to regret not listening to me," Roy said, using the spoon to point at Fai.

"Yes, yes, I'll keep it in mind," Fai said as he pushed away the nearly full bowl and grabbed the blood bag instead.

"Oh, looks like it's time for a private training session for Lupa," Roy snorted, drawing Fai's attention towards Kyle who had appeared at Lupa's table. Despite being on the other side of the hall, Fai did not miss the fear that briefly flashed across Lupa's face at whatever he had said to her before she schooled her features into the same emotionless mask that she usually wore when dealing with Kyle.

"Private training session?" Fai asked, watching with narrowed his eyes as Lupa stood up and vanished with Kyle into a side corridor that led the way to the training arenas.

"Drink up," Roy nodded towards the blood bag in Fai's hands. "If this is like any of those other times, she won't be back before lights out. Trainers sometimes take us away for extra training during mealtimes if they're not happy with something we've done. They call it 'constructive training.'"
"But why would L-L-Lupa be punished? She h-h-hasn't done anything." Fai frowned, letting the blood bag drop on the table as he stood up. "I'll be back soon."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Roy called after him. Fai ignored him, hurrying towards the corridor he had seen Kyle and Lupa enter. "And stay out of sight." Roy's warning followed him into the darkened passage and Fai shook his head in exasperation.

Despite what the gladiator thought, Fai wasn't attracted to Lupa. There was no denying that Lupa was beautiful despite the scars that marred her skin. And there was something about her that pulled him in when she let her aggressive mannerisms slip. But Fai wasn't attracted to her because it was a luxury Fai couldn't allow himself. Not when he still had a promise to fulfill.

_I only want to make sure she's all right._ Fai had _not_ liked the fear on her face when Kyle had come for her. As Lupa's teammate, it was his job to make certain that she wasn't in too much trouble. Who knew what Kyle might be forcing her to do in the name of 'private training'?

Hearing raised voices up ahead, Fai slowed his pace, carefully approaching the intersection in the corridor. The training arena that Kyle and Seishirou usually reserved for his team was just ahead, the metal door leading to it only slightly ajar. Fai dared to get as near as possible without fully exposing himself, thankful that the corridor wasn't properly lit at that time of the night. The cold white light spilling through the crack in the door was all that illuminated the hallway.

"How can you ask that of me?" Lupa snarled and Fai figured she was probably glaring at Kyle, the sclera of her eyes flickering between the usual white and the _Lupine_ black. Fai had seen it happen several times in the two weeks he had spent as her teammate.

"Have you forgotten who you are talking to, Lupa?" Kyle said, his frigid voice easily carrying over to where Fai was.

"You never miss a chance to remind me," Lupa spat.

"Then you would do well to remember that if you fail at this task," Kyle paused and Fai heard the man step closer to Lupa, "I can change my mind about putting you up for sale, should you survive this annual event."

"No," Lupa gasped and Fai was surprised at how scared she sounded. "You said you would—"

"I know what I said," Kyle cut in impatiently. "But if you don't do exactly as I tell you, well then, you can forget about your beloved brother coming to your rescue."

"You swore," Lupa's voice grew so soft, Fai had to strain his hearing to catch her words. "You wouldn't dare—"

The sound of a sharp slap rang in the stillness as her words were cut off, and Fai heard her glasses clatter to the floor.

"I wouldn't dare?" Kyle snapped. "Don't forget your place. I _own_ you. Everything that you are belongs to me: your mind, your soul, your fucking body. So when I tell you that I have a task for you, 420, you do _not_ question me. You do _not_ argue with me and you sure as hell don't tell me what I would and wouldn't dare to do. Do I make myself clear?"

Fai had to restrain himself from rushing in at that moment. He had little doubt that Lupa would lose control and rip Kyle to shreds, but much to his surprise, he did not hear any pained screams coming
from the other side of the door.

"I said, *do I make myself clear, 420?*"

"Yes, Master Kyle," Lupa whispered and Fai had a hard time linking the submissive tone to the fiery *Lupine*.

"Good." Kyle moved closer to Lupa. "This is something to help you with the task. Don't disappoint me, Lupa, or I won't be responsible for the consequences."

Fai took that as his cue to retreat, walking down a couple of corridors before stopping to wait for Lupa. She hadn't sound happy with whatever task Kyla had assigned her. All too soon, Lupa had turned around the corner and spotted Fai. Her amber eyes grew wide behind her spectacles as she paled.

"You…" she gasped.

"L-Lupa," he said, putting up his hands in a placating gesture as he hurried to explain himself, hoping that the stutter wouldn't hinder his explanation. "I saw Kyle come to you and I was wor—"

"What the hell are you doing here?" she snarled, covering the distance between them in a blink. Fai would have believed her to have used vampire speed if he didn't know any better. Her callused fingers wrapped around the collar of his shirt as she pushed him into the wall, baring her teeth as the whites of her eyes flashed to *Lupine* black. "How much did you hear?"

Fai looked down at her, feeling an odd sense of calm overcoming him. Being a werewolf, she was stronger than him, but she was also a head shorter. And even though she was the one with her hands around his collar, practically spitting with rage, Fai could see something that her anger failed to hide.

*She's scared.*

"How much did you hear?" she repeated, shaking him to emphasize her question.

"Kyle wants you to do something for h-h-him," he replied, making no moves to free himself from her grip. If thinking that she was in control could help her calm down, he was willing to let her knock him into the wall a couple of times. "Something that you're not willing to do. If you can share what h-h-he wants you to do, I could h-h-help."

"You… want to… help me?" Lupa looked surprised by his offer, her grip loosening on his collar though she didn't let him go or move away.

"If you would l-l-let me." He nodded. And Fai realized that he meant every word.

"But… you don't even know what he *wants* from me." The black shifted back to white in her eyes.

"Whatever it is, it's upsetting you. I would l-like to h-h-help if I can."

For the longest moment, Lupa simply stared at him, searching his face for signs of deception, and Fai became aware of the way her breath brushed his cheeks. He also became aware of the way her body pressed against his, though all too soon, these thoughts were pushed from his mind altogether as her lips crashed against his. Fire raced through his veins, spreading out from the point of contact as her mouth began to move.

Her fingers untangled from his collar as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer.
Her tongue brushed against his lower lip, drawing a moan from somewhere deep in his throat. Taking the chance, she slipped it past his lips and the taste of copper exploded across his tongue as he brushed it against hers. Fai gasped, pulling away in surprise and Lupa frowned at him, hurt flashing in her eyes before she masked it.

"You're bleeding."

"I bit my tongue earlier when Kyle…" She trailed off, looking uncomfortable as she slowly unwound her arms from around his neck, though she didn't step away. "About what you asked me earlier. I don't think you want to help me with what he wants, but thanks for the offer."

"L-Lupa, is there… anything else I could do?"

"Your bleeding heart is going to get you killed one of these days, 224," she said raking her fingers through his hair. She tightened them into fists as she dragged him down until they were only a hairsbreadth away. Her lips ghosted against his as she spoke the next words. "I suppose you could help me with this." And then she closed the distance once more. Her tongue pushed past his lips, a desperate kind of aggression coloring the way she explored his mouth. Their teeth jarred together as she dominated the kiss. The taste of copper exploded against his tongue as heat coiled in the pit of his stomach. Vampire instincts rose to the surface, coaxed on by the blood now flowing freely from her wounded tongue.

Wanting more control than his current position allowed, Fai flipped them around. Lupa tried to pull free, but Fai moved closer still, not letting her break the kiss. The blood stopped flowing as the injury healed and he growled. Wrapping one arm around her waist, to pull her flush against him, Fai tangled his fingers in her braided hair to get better access as he forcefully tilted her head. He caught her lip in his teeth, giving it a tug and Lupa responded in kind. She tightened her grip on his hair and he felt a few strands part from his scalp. She struggled to take back control but Fai only relented when she managed to pull her lips free. She took the lead then, kissing him with a fervor that left his mind spinning until she pulled away, gasping for breath.

"Your eyes…" she murmured.

"I missed dinner." Lupa blinked in surprise before giving him a mischievous smirk as she forcefully pushed away from the wall. Fai stumbled back, the air escaping his lungs with a whoosh when she reversed their positions and his back collided with the cement.

"They suit you." She grinned, untangling her fingers from his hair as she trailed them across his back, slipping under the hem of his shirt. "A reminder that you're more than a pretty face."

"I thought it would have been obvious by now that I'm not just a pretty face." Lupa waited until her lip had healed before pulling away, her body trembling as she looked up at him for a moment before smiling.

"Here," she offered, tilting her head to expose her neck. Fai swallowed, his gaze drawn to the pulse thrumming strong beneath her skin. I shouldn't be doing this. Fai hesitated, and Lupa made an
impatient noise in her throat as she grabbed his hair and pulled him close. "Werewolves heal through rapid blood regeneration, so go ahead. Take as much as you want."

Fai panted against her neck, trying to make sense of his actions, very much aware of his hand still pressed against the small of her back.

"Come on, pretty boy," Lupa growled, impatiently tugging at his hair.

Fai snapped out of his contemplation, heat rising along his skin at her choice of name.

Why can't it ever be "handsome"? Fai mentally whined, dragging his fangs along her pulse. He bit down, though not hard enough to break her skin as his hand explored her back, making Lupa moan. His lips trailed all over the skin of her neck as her chest heaved unevenly against him. She made another impatient noise in her throat, tugging harder at his hair.

"You're doing that on purpose, aren't you?" she panted, grinding against him and Fai closed his eyes, groaning in appreciation.

Feeling his control slip, he grabbed her hips to stop her, sinking his fangs into her throat before she had a chance to try something else. Warm, sticky blood gushed into his mouth and he felt his control over his hunger slip altogether.

Fai lapped at the blood and Lupa's grip loosened from his hair, her hands coming to rest on his arms, nails digging into his biceps as he heard her moan. Her warm breath brushed against his ear as she leaned into him, and Fai tightened his grip on her hips and pulled her up to him as she wrapped her legs around his waist. Her blood was sweet and tangy though it carried a faint underlying taste of something he couldn't identify. The sharp, bitter element made his heart beat faster and his worries grow silent, and he found that he rather liked the feeling.

It took a herculean effort on his part to pull out his fangs half a minute later. Licking off as much of the blood as he could from her neck, he looked up and found Lupa staring at him through half-lidded eyes as she stood back on her own feet. A hot, burning need began to grow within him at the feeling of her warm body pressed against him, making it harder for him to think straight as a haze enveloped his mind.

"Maybe," she breathed in a raspy whisper, "we should relocate to someplace more private." The look in her darkened eyes sent the blood rushing towards his lower body.

"Is that a good idea?" he asked even as a darker part of him entertained questions of what it would feel like to take more than just her blood. Especially when she appeared so willing to give it to him.

"Don't tell me you're having second thoughts now," she said, grinding her hips against his once more as if to test his resolve. Fai made a strangled noise in his throat. Grinning at the wordless confirmation that it wasn't the case, she pulled away and grabbed hold of his wrist. "Let's go to your room," she suggested even as she started leading the way, Fai jogging along to keep up with her hurried pace.

Nearing the intersection that led to the cafeteria they could hear the voices of the other gladiators still at dinner. Lupa sped up towards the corridor that led to his quarters. She looked almost feverish by the time they got to the metal door and Fai would have felt worried for her sake had he not been feeling the same as her. His pulse pounded inside his head and his body felt on the verge of exploding.

The door swung closed behind him at the same time as his back collided with the wall, Lupa
attacking his mouth with fervor. The kiss was frantic and heady, all clashing teeth and tongues as their lips fused together. He was barely aware of the sound of ripping cloth as Lupa tugged at his shirt, pulling it apart as her inquisitive fingers explored his torso. The feral growl that rose from his chest, rumbled deep in his throat as he pushed her shirt out of the way. Breaking off the kiss with an impatient noise, Lupa tugged it off and sent it flying somewhere behind her as she latched on to his mouth once more.

Fai's hands explored the newly exposed skin, fingers brushing against the straps of her bra as he ran them down her back. She shuddered and groaned against his lips, her nails digging into his back when he rested his hand over puckered scars that ran down right side of her stomach. Fai slipped his hands lower, over the contours of her hips and thighs till he was grabbing her by the knees and hooking her legs around his waist as he switched their positions.

Breaking away, Fai started trailing kisses along the side of her neck, licking away what little blood remained. His tongue brushed against the puncture wounds from his fangs that had scabbed over by now and Lupa trembled in his hold, her nails breaking the skin on his back from where she was gripping him.

_I shouldn't be doing this_, whispered something in the back of his mind. _This isn't right. I should stop._

Fai sank his fangs into the yielding flesh of Lupa's throat and lapped at the blood that flowed. The tangy taste of her blood, so different from Kurogane's and the blood bags that Fai fed from, was now overshadowed by the unidentifiable flavor that was pungent yet addictive. It silenced the little voice questioning him about the sanity of his actions. Heat pooled between his thighs served only to fuel his dark desire that made him want more than just her blood. It made him _need_ more than just her blood.

"Fai…" The whispered word that was part moan and part sigh sent a shudder down his spine and into his toes. She had called him by his given name, but the significance of it was lost on him as he used a burst of vampire speed and brought them both to his bed. Lupa fell into the mattress with a small 'oof' before Fai pinned her in place with his hips and claimed her mouth.
Kurogane frowned at the face staring back at him from the mirror. The man was a stranger with angular features that carried a hint of regality to them: sharp cheekbones, a thin, long nose, and a pointed chin. All this was framed by black, wavy hair that reached the nape of his neck and fell across his forehead in messy bangs that brushed the tip of his brows. The only thing familiar about this stranger was the crimson eyes, but according to what Nixon had told him, Kurogane would soon be losing that part of himself forever.

Two more days, Kurogane sighed as he turned away and started getting dressed for the day. Fuuma had convinced Touya to turn Kurogane in time for the full moon. What was more, Nixon had managed to track down an antiquities dealer who might be in possession of Ginryuu. Tomoyo had agreed to help him buy it back if the man refused to return it.

"Kuanos, you ready to leave?" Nixon's muffled voice came through the door. Kurogane resisted the urge to pull a face at the name Nixon had picked out for his alias. With his altered face, Kurogane was now to introduce himself as Kuanos to Touya and anyone else who asked, including his mysterious sponsor. Shrugging on a worn out leather jacket, he turned and opened the door to let Nixon in.

"You sure this guy has Ginryuu?" he asked.

"The description in the ad he put up seems to match the one you gave." Nixon shrugged as he motioned for Kurogane to follow. "Even if it isn't the one you lost, we can keep it in mind as a backup in case we can't find your sword in time for the final event."

Kurogane grunted in response, knowing that no other sword would be good enough to replace his family heirloom. Souhi had come close, but he'd lost that katana along with his arm in Ceres to save the mage's life. And now, Kurogane was about to lose something more to save the idiot's ass once again.

"He said we had to meet him early since he's got someplace else to go," Nixon told him as they walked out into the narrow streets of Liberalist-occupied Cavahall. Kurogane drew nothing more than a passing glance from the people. It had been four days since Masooma had cast the spell to change his face. Kurogane couldn't say he missed the constant whispers and scrutiny. "It works in our favor though," Nixon was saying. "We get plenty of time to spare for our meeting with the guy who's going to arrange your sympathizer sponsor."

"And this sponsor can get me into the gladiator event?" Kurogane asked as they wove through the crowd, crossing from one sector into another. There were signs marking the boundaries of the sectors, though seeing as Kurogane couldn't read the runic language, the easiest way for him to tell was when they crossed the security checkpoints.

"Yeah, he'll sign you up as his champion," Nixon said, nodding, "and you'll have to fight in the
qualifier against one of The Company's regular gladiators- those are the guys that didn't make the cut for the finale, in case you're wondering- and kick their ass to get in. It's a pretty straightforward process, so getting you in won't be a problem once we convince the sympathizer to sponsor you."

"I see."

They crossed two more sectors before nearing the place where the shop was located. Kurogane was pleased to note that he wasn't tired in the least. *I'm getting back in shape.* He smirked, knowing that covering such a distance on foot would have been impossible for him two weeks ago.

"Here we are: 'Antiques and Antiquities','" Nixon announced, stopping in front of a shop with a glass front set in a wooden frame with intricate carvings. Kurogane observed the outside of the shop, noting that the frame was stained with remnants of the dark, sludge-like rain near ground level. The parts of the frame still protected by the awning, however, were coated in powder-blue paint. Looking through the window, he could see that the inside of the shop was dark, though there was a light turned on somewhere in the back.

Nixon muttered something about contacting the dealer to let him know they were there, but Kurogane didn't see the point in standing around when the man was already inside the shop. Ignoring his companion's warning, Kurogane pushed on the door. A bell jingled overhead as he walked inside.

"Be right out there with you," the shop's owner said. Kurogane noted with some interest that the man's voice carried a gentle lilt despite the accent that made it sound as though his tongue was rolling over the words. It sounded almost like he was speaking around a pebble. Nixon rushed in after Kurogane, frowning in disapproval.

"Kuanos, you shouldn't just barge in like that," he said in a harsh whisper as the lights in the shop were switched on.

"Sorry for the wait. I was in the back," the dealer apologized, closing the backdoor behind him. Kurogane thought he spotted a flash of something white on the other side just before the door shut, but his attention was quickly drawn to the man that had walked into their line of sight.

"Mage?" The word was past his lips before Kurogane could stop himself.

"That's a rather serious accusation, mate." The words flitted through Kurogane's ears and he realized a moment too late that this man wasn't the mage. The messy blond hair that was pulled into a ponytail over one shoulder was far longer than what Kurogane had been seeing in the televised matches. And the mage's tone never carried that light, staccato edge. Disappointment welled up inside him even as the man continued. "I hope you have some proof to back it up, or you and I are going to have a bit of a problem, I'm afraid."

"Never mind, I thought you were someone else," Kurogane grunted, tamping down the nauseating feeling. It didn't take him much time to deduce that this was the twin that had died in the mage's world. Just the previous day, he'd seen the mage fight against three opponents in something called a tag-team match, so he knew the idiot was alive. And since this one hadn't died due to the wizard's presence, it stood to reason that they were not the same. Which meant that this antiquities dealer was Cavahall's version of the other twin.

"I see," the twin nodded, though his tone remained frosty.

"Excuse my friend, Mr. Yuui. He's a little confused, if you know what I mean," Nixon piped up as he stepped forward and held out his hand for a shake. "I'm Nixon and this is Kuanos. We're
interested in the sword you put up for sale recently."

"Ah, yes," Yuui's smiled pleasantly as he shook Nixon's hand, his entire demeanor shifting in a moment. Turning around, he gestured for them to follow. "The Dragonlord's Blade. It is one of the finest examples of craftsmanship from ancient Japan. The region may not be more than a nuclear wasteland now, but examples of the skill its people possessed survive to this day."

Kurogane's eyes narrowed at the katana displayed in glass case set along the far wall. The familiar steel blade gleamed in the dull lighting, and Kurogane didn't need to look at the dragon-shaped hilt of the sword to recognize it as Ginryuu. "How did you get it?"

Yuui quirked a brow at his hostile tone, though the mild expression remained on his face as he answered after a moment's pause. "I got it from one of my clients in exchange for a priceless artifact. Now, are you gentlemen interested in buying it for yourselves or are you here on someone else's behalf?"

"That's mine," Kurogane growled, taking a hasty step towards Yuui before Nixon got in the way and stopped him.

"What my friend means to say is that we are very interested in buying the sword." He grinned, shooting Kurogane an annoyed look before turning back to the shop owner. "I'm a little concerned, though. This is an original artifact, isn't it? I mean, are you certain about its craftsmanship and the quality of the blade?"

"This, my friend, is the genuine thing," Yuui said with a flourish of his hand, making no moves to open the case. "A true collector would be able to tell the difference between a replica and an original piece like the one I have here. Although, considering that this your first time here for an antique piece, I suppose I can cut you a deal. For a small, affordable price, I'll let you take the blade and test it for your satisfaction, if you'd like, before you buy."

"Hand it over then," Kurogane demanded with an impatient scowl, ignoring the warning look Nixon sent his way.

"Your friend is quite new to this business, isn't he?" Yuui said with a shake of his head and Kurogane's scowl turned murderous. The blond bastard had the gall to look amused as he moved towards the glass case. He unlocked the display by pressing the palm of his hand against a biometric scanner and lifted the top with one hand. Kurogane wanted to punch the bastard. The only thing stopping him was the fact that the blond handled Ginryuu with the respect the sword deserved. The shop owner balanced the gleaming blade on thin, callused fingers as he brought it over to Kurogane. "Take care not to cut yourself, mate. The Dragonlord's Blade is quite sharp and I'd rather you didn't get any blood on it. I only just polished it the other night."

Anger bubbled just beneath his skin at the jabs, but Kurogane chose to focus on the blade instead. He reached out with his mechanical arm and grabbed the hilt. The ancient blade sang with the power of Tomoyo's blessing as it recognized Kurogane's touch. He may not have his own face but Ginryuu didn't need to know what he looked like to know who it belonged to. His princess's spiritual magic was attuned to his presence and flowed into his body as soon as he made contact with the sword's hilt. Kurogane grinned. The gentle warmth of Tomoyo's familiar magic made him feel whole in a way the broken Unnatural that healed him could never accomplish. Mindful of the antique clutter that surround him, Kurogane went through a few simple katas with Ginryuu.

"Would you look at that?" Yuui said, breaking through the tranquility that had begun to wrap around his mind. "I didn't have much to worry about after all."
"Kuanos knows how to handle swords, Mr. Yuui," Nixon said, and Kurogane gritted his teeth. The lookalike's presence grated on his nerves. Sure, the mage acted carefree and smug at times, but the idiot never bore this kind of arrogance. "Now, I believe we have payment to discuss."

"Its current worth is estimated to be around one hundred and twenty k-credits. Add to that the extra trial fees of around twenty k-credits I'd say that brings up the total to one hundred and forty k-credits."

"A hundred and forty thousand credits?" Nixon yelped, his eyes bugging out in incredulity. Yuui smirked in amusement. Kurogane badly wanted to rattle the calm, self-entitled bastard and only barely managed to hold himself in check. Outright attacking the man wouldn't be wise if he wanted to get Ginryuu back.

"The Dragonlord's Blade is not a cheap weapon, Mr. Nixon." The shop-owner warned them as he turned his back towards the two.

The silver blade whistled as it sliced through the air and the doppelganger's ponytail of golden hair fell to the floor. The hair that once reached the middle of his back now brushed the nape of his neck, where the shallowest of cuts had appeared. Crimson blossomed on the wound just as Kurogane brought the sword back and let his stance relax. Just because he couldn't attack the man didn't mean Kurogane would waste the opportunity to shake the antiquities dealer's confidence. The blond froze in his movements before slowly turning around, staring at the bundle of hair on the floor as his now unbound hair fell around his face.

"Looks like it's sharp enough," Kurogane smirked by way of explanation and next to him, Nixon groaned in exasperation.

Yuui's smile was frosty as he looked up to regard him, eyes alight with an unknown emotion though Kurogane was distracted by a sudden surge of energy in the shop owner's right hand. His gaze shot towards the hand held loosely in a fist by the blonde's side. "I take it you are satisfied by the sword's performance, Mr. Kuanos?"

"We'll take it," he nodded, still eyeing Yuui's hand for signs of spell-casting. There were none. With a cold smile plastered on his lips, Yuui opened his palm and held out his hand for the sword. The sleeve of his shirt slipped back to reveal a beaded bracelet and Kurogane realized that that was the source of the energy signature. Is that some kind of personalized weapon? Kurogane frowned. He did not want to hand Ginryuu over if the blond had something literally up his sleeve to attack them with, though the bastard didn't give him a choice.

"If you are done inspecting it, I'll need the Dragonlord's Blade, mate." Yuui said, still holding out his hand. The energy Kurogane had felt dissipated, and he reluctantly handed over his sword. The black beaded bracelet gleamed innocently as the shop-owner took Ginryuu and brought it to the counter. Setting it down out of Kurogane's reach, the man turned his attention to Nixon.

"That will be a hundred and forty…plus an additional ten for property damages."

"I'm sorry, but did you just ask for an extra ten thousand credits for non-existent property damages?" Nixon's brow's shot up in shock.

"I didn't damage anything," Kurogane growled at the same time.

"I could have you and your friend arrested for attempted murder," Yuui answered with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "I don't take kindly to attacks on my person, mate. You should just be glad I'm not pressing charges for something this traumatizing. Now, I won't force you to buy the sword if you've changed your mind, but I'm afraid you will still be paying for the property damages. I'll
give you a moment to discuss it amongst yourselves if you'd like."

"How generous," Kurogane sneered as Nixon grabbed his arm and tugged him towards the other side of the shop.

"One hundred and fifty thousand credits?" Nixon exclaimed in a harsh whisper as soon as they were out of earshot. "Tommy is going to kill me. She agreed to pay for the sword from Steel's savings, but honestly Kurogane, cut the dead guy some slack would you? That's his entire life savings, give or take a few thousand credits and you're blowing it all on a freaking sword. We can get guns twice as good for a quarter of that price from a few suppliers."

"That's Ginryuu," Kurogane said. "Get it for me now, and I'll pay you back when I find the manjuu."

Nixon stared at him long and hard, a sight that Kurogane wasn't willing to admit was slightly unnerving given the man's glassy, somewhat unfocused eyes. "Fine... "Nixon sighed at last, "but you're telling Tommy why we had to pay the guy an extra thirty."

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Yuui fixed the red scarf around his neck. He was using it to obscure the lower half of his face with his eyes concealed behind a pair of cyber-specs. It wasn't much of a disguise but he'd used it before to mask his face on jaunts through different sectors of Cavahall whenever he went out as Yuui. Whistling a jaunty tune he moved from one sector to the next, bypassing the security checkpoints with his usual method of taking back alleys and side streets.

Shortly after he had sold the katana to the Liberalists and made a hefty earning of one hundred and fifty thousand credits, Mokona had come bouncing out of the back of the shop. The little Unnatural was currently a lump of warm fur resting in an inner pocket of his jacket as he walked around the city, trying to help the creature find its companion. Mokona had claimed it had sensed Kurogane use magic nearby, which seemed strange in itself, seeing as the ninja wasn't supposed to have magic. But then he recalled that Mokona had said that Yuui's twin had cast a spell on the man's sword.

Yuui had offered to help Mokona look, failing to mention that he had just sold a sword to a man of similar description. But Yuui doubted his short-tempered client was the dimension-traveling ninja. After all, Mokona's companion was supposed to have short spiky hair and a permanent frown plastered on his face, and Yuui's customer only fit one part of the criteria. He didn't think the two might be the same person because Kurogane was a normal human being who was not even on The Company's radar. There wasn't really much of a reason for a man like that to alter his appearance, given that he too must have been searching for his companions. Looking different than he used to would only serve to hinder the man.

Mokona had been all ready to rush outside and find its lost companion, but Yuui had the sense to stop it. It wouldn't do for the little Unnatural to reveal itself to the Company goons that prowled the sectors. He could spare half an hour to assist the dimension hopper before he had to go back to his apartment and switch to the guise of Xerxes Break so.

Nixon had asked Xerxes to arrange for a meeting between a sponsor and one of the Liberalist-aligned Unnaturals that wanted to sign up for a suicide mission. Though Xerxes was in touch with a few sympathizers that would have been all too happy to help the Liberalists, Yuui's curiosity had been piqued by the nature of the request. Most Unnaturals wanted to get out from under The Company's clutches, not willingly submit to slavery.
Which was why he had already decided that in three days' time, Nixon and his friend would be meeting with Ashura Veda to discuss the details of the sign up process. The actual process itself was straightforward and wouldn't take more than a day to complete, with Ashura's sponsored gladiator fighting against one of The Company's. If he passed the qualifier, he was in for the final event. Ashura would provide the papers for the registration process that would claim the Unnatural as his property. He would then sign the papers handing control of his champion to The Company for the duration of the final event. If he survived, the Unnatural would be returned to him at the end. Other than that, all that was required of Ashura was to show up as spectator for the matches to help with the ruse of being the gladiator's owner.

Reaching up with one hand, he pushed back the messy mop of his hair and frowned when the unruly bangs fell back in his eyes. *It will be quite a test of my patience if the Unnatural is anything like that brute Kuanos,* Yuui thought just as the reminder he had set for the meeting began to beep.

He switched it off with a twitch of his fingers before patting the pocket in which Mokona hid. "Any sign of him, Little Friend?"

"No, Mokona can't sense Kurogane anymore," the little creature whimpered.

"I'm sorry," he said, biting back a sigh as he turned and started heading towards his apartment. "I'm afraid this is all the time I could spare to search for your friend today. I have to meet with some clients in a few hours and I need to go home and get ready."

"But Mokona needs to find Kurogane," the Unnatural protested.

"And you will," Yuui promised quietly, ignoring the looks the passersby shot towards him at Mokona's outburst. "We can go out and look for him again tomorrow."
Minding the workers in the mines wasn't thrilling or exciting, Syaoran decided. His job mainly consisted of roaming the mines under his supervision. He had to ensure that the miners were doing their part in extracting the Cerellium ore and taking breaks to rest only during their assigned slots instead of slacking off when no one was watching. Production had been falling behind their extraction quota ever since Director Bia had demanded an increase in Cerellium output, which meant longer working hours for everyone.

It wasn't at all troublesome, though, since his notoriety as one of Touya's favored scavengers made sure that Syaoran's orders were heard without any protest despite his young age. But then again, he was a vampire, and maybe the miners didn't take his physical appearance to be a good indicator of his age.

The mines themselves were cold and damp and went a long way into the earth. Syaoran was assigned one of the newer sections that ran deeper than the rest of the complex maze of tunnels. As such, his job also included carrying out regular inspections of the beams and supports erected to keep the tunnels from collapsing, a duty that Syaoran took very seriously. After all, his negligence must have played a part in the accident that led to his amnesia and the loss of lives of every other worker under him. Touya had shown a great amount of trust in his abilities to reassign him to the position of supervisor. Then again, according to Touya, it had been an accident that could have happened under anyone's watch. It was just bad luck that it happened with Syaoran.

Syaoran wandered through the cobblestone streets of the Scavengers' complex. His path was lighted by the moon that hung in the sky like a silver disk. The full moon was only two nights away, and Touya had been in a pleasant mood the whole week.

The Liberalists wanted one of their own to infiltrate the final half of The Company's Gladiator Program. Someone on good terms with Touya had approached the Lupine with the request to turn the volunteer. There hadn't been anyone crazy enough to risk attempting such a mission before but apparently things had changed. In Touya's own words, 'if there is a crazy-ass bastard out there willing to give The Company a loud and clear "fuck you," I'm all too happy to help.' Said 'crazy-ass bastard' would be arriving at the complex in two days' time to get bitten by Touya, an Alpha.

Syaoran wondered at the kind of man who would willingly give himself an irreversible condition and then walk to his death. According to what he had overheard of Touya and Fuuma's conversation, the man was going through all this trouble to save a loved one, but Syaoran couldn't imagine a situation where he might end up doing the same. He didn't have anyone that precious to him. Meiling could be that person someday, but until he could regain his memories, he couldn't say for sure.

He didn't like the thought of lying awake in bed, once again listening to the sound of her breathing as he meditated and failed to fill the gaping hole in his memories, which was why he had chosen to wander about the complex. A walk would help him clear his mind as the sun sank across the horizon and the moon rose. He had paid no attention to where his feet took him as the night drew on, but he was still a little surprised to find himself standing outside Emeraude's clinic.

His brow furrowed in confusion as he stared at the entrance. *This is the third time I have come here without even realizing it.* This was the place he had ended up at the last two times he'd gone for a
walk at night. Hesitating briefly, he entered the building, acting on the feeling in his gut that always tugged him to this place. The clinic was empty so late into the night, though he could hear the snores of a few patients as he walked by their rooms. He had no idea why he was hurrying down the corridor, but something in that place was calling to him. Now that he was inside the building the feeling had gotten stronger.

*It's coming from under the floor,* he realized as he walked through the corridors, making a full circle of the inside of the building. The feeling was strongest around Emeraude's office, though it remained beneath the ground. Looking around to see if someone was coming, he tried the doorknob, a little surprised when it opened without any resistance. *Did she forget to lock the door, or is she that confident that no one would steal from her?* he wondered as he slipped inside. Somehow, he could tell that the way to get to the source of the call was through the office. It was almost as if a something was guiding him as he move across the room and came to stand next to an old-fashioned filing cabinet. Pressing his palm against the cold steel, he was not at all surprised when the cabinet easily slid out of the way, as though aided by magic, to reveal a set of stairs that descended into the darkness.

He could hear a gentle hum of machinery, interspersed with little beeps and the soft whoosh of air moving. His vision automatically sharpened as he headed into the darkness, picking up on a dim light at the bottom of the stairs as he got lower and lower. A gentle splash of magic washed over him as he exited the stairway and entered a brightly-lit room. Glancing backwards, he noticed that the stairway was still immersed in darkness. The room itself contained an occupied bed, surrounded by what appeared to be some kind of life-support system, judging by the readings the machines displayed. Tubes and wires emerged from each of the machines, attached to the prone figure in the bed. As Syaoran approached, he realized that it was an Unnatural that lay there. A *Lupine,* as was evident from the wolf-like characteristics that carried a hint of femininity.

Syaoran stared at the long, unkempt auburn hair that was splayed about around the unconscious *Lupine's* head, along with the brittle, sunken features of the she-wolf's face. A set of thin tubes had been inserted into her nostrils and another, slightly thicker tube was inserted between her parted jaws. Wires ending in little white patches were attached to her arms and head while more still disappeared under her shirt. There were long scars running down the length of her arms that told the tale of painful injuries, though Syaoran couldn't guess how long the girl might have been there. Syaoran's frown deepened. *Why does Emeraude have an injured Lupine hidden in a secret room in her office's basement?* His attention, however, was quickly drawn away from the girl and towards the two glowing orbs that were suspended in the air above one of the machines. Walking closer he saw that the orbs were in fact two feathers, a brown one and a green one, enclosed in a myriad of crimson runic symbols that he recognized as spells.

*The feathers are what have been calling out to me,* a voice murmured in the back of his mind as the urge to touch them grew stronger. Entranced, he reached out with one hand to caress the brown feather, his fingers meeting a little resistance from the spells but he continued pushing. *I have to get them...*  

"Syaoran?" Emeraude's voice broke him out of his trance and Syaoran jumped back.  

"Emeraude," he gasped, backing away from the machines until he bumped into the bed, but managed to catch himself before he fell on the unconscious *Lupine.* "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"You should not be here," she said as she hurried into the room and began checking on the unconscious girl. "What were you doing? How did you come down here?"
"I-I... something has been calling to me all week, and I just came to see what it was," he replied, casting a suspicious look towards the feathers. Even now, he could feel their pull on him, but now that he was aware of the sensation, he could ignore it. "Your office door was unlocked," he added by way of explanation for her second question, and Emeraude shook her head.

"There were spells guarding the entrance to this room. You should not have been able to cross them," she said, adjusting the controls on one of the devices, looking afraid as she glanced towards Syaoran. "It is a good thing I got here when I did. Had I been later by even a moment, you cannot imagine how much damage could have been done to both of you."

"Sorry," he ducked his head, heat rising to his cheeks as the older woman berated him.

"As you should be. Touching those feathers might have been fatal for you," Emeraude warned.

"What? Why?" He asked, feeling a jolt of alarm at the thought that he could have died had he touched them. "What are those feathers?"

"They are very powerful, magical artifacts," Emeraude replied, motioning for him to follow as she moved towards the exit. Not wanting to be in the same place as magical feathers with the power to enchant and then kill him, Syaoran hastened to obey, watching in interest as Emeraude retrieved a glowing cube from the folds of her dress and touched it to the entrance. In a flash, the cube transformed into a translucent barrier that covered the entire doorway. "I am harnessing their magic in hopes of aiding little Sakura's recovery."

"I thought Lupines possessed supernatural healing just like Vampirosa," Syaoran said as they emerged in the office. Emeraude slid the filing cabinet back into place with a simple push of her hand. "Why would she need help to heal? And how long has she been this way?"

Emeraude gestured for him to sit in a visitor's chair as she took the adjacent chair. "There are several long-term treatment rooms set up in this clinic, little one," she said once he was seated. She gave him a long, assessing gaze, and Syaoran felt the urge to fidget under her intense scrutiny. Something within him recognized her as his superior on an instinctive level, which, given her three hundred years of experience, amounted to a lot. Which was why he did not begrudge her the use of the name 'little one'. In her eyes, he was still just a child, and judging from the way she was studying him, she appeared to be contemplating whether to answer his questions or not.

And so Syaoran quashed the urge to fidget as he met her stare and held her gaze. She appeared to reach a decision when she gave him a melancholy smile. "Lupines do indeed possess supernatural healing to rival our own," she finally said. "However, there is one significant difference between our method of healing. Have you noticed how our injuries never scar? Excepting those that were received during or before our rebirth."

Syaoran nodded, his hand straying to the spot right over his heart where he could feel the five puckered scars through the material of his shirt.

"The Lupines heal through accelerated regeneration of their blood," Emeraude said. "Their healing is remarkable in that, so long as they are alive, they can re-grow severed limbs or damaged organs, although the scarring that is left behind permanently marks the damage. When the mines were still under The Company's control, little Sakura got into an incident involving some of the human supervisors that left her in critical condition. She received severe blows to the head, fracturing her skull and damaging a part of her brain. The healing kicked in before a healer could work to correct the damage, and her brain tissue received the scarring that is typical of the Lupine healing."

"So does she come here to correct the scarring in her brain?" Syaoran asked.
"No," Emeraude shook her head again, "she never left here. That child has yet to awaken from the coma that claimed her that dark day. Scar tissue formed in her brain, same as the rest of her body, when she healed. I am hoping to correct some of the damage with the aid of those feathers, so I advise you not to come looking for them again, no matter how strongly you feel the urge to claim them. Taking the feathers away will not only mean death for little Sakura, because their powerful magic might just kill you, too."

"Why?"

"I am afraid that is a question that I cannot answer, little one. You will have to trust my word on it." From the way Emeraude said that last part, he could tell she had closed the topic for further discussion.

Syaoran bit the inside of his cheek as he held in a 'can't or won't answer' question. The way she had phrased it seemed as though she knew, but wasn't willing to share the answer with him. Syaoran glanced towards the cabinet that concealed the passage to the secret medical room with the comatose werewolf and the two feathers with deadly magic as he stood up. He could tell he wasn't going to find out anything more and inclined his head in a show of gratitude.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you so late at night. I think I'll head back to the apartment. Meiling will be worried that I haven't returned yet."

"You may visit me again, little one." Emeraude smiled as she too stood up and started walking him to the clinic's exit. "Although I would suggest that you come at a different hour, perhaps when it is still light. Contrary to myths, our kind is not averse to sunlight," she said with a teasing quirk of her lips. Syaoran responded with a slightly embarrassed smile.

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Very well then." Syaoran nodded. "Now, I believe there may be a young lady awaiting your arrival. Have a good night, Syaoran."

"Goodnight to you as well, Emeraude." Mulling over all that he had discovered, Syaoran turned and started his trek back to the apartment.

Chapter End Notes

Syaoran has met Cavahall's version of Sakura. She was the reason why the group never ended up in Cavahall during their travels when canon version of Sakura was still with them.
Fai stifled a gasp as he found himself revisiting the nightmare of his childhood. He knew it was just a dream, but the tremors shooting down his spine upon seeing the Valley of Sinners spread before him were far too real. His breath came in short bursts that failed to provide enough oxygen to his lungs and he felt like he was drowning. The insurmountable walls boxed him in from the front and the back while piles of broken bodies cut off his path in other two directions. Nausea bubbled in his throat as a body was flung from the tower.

"No!" he tried to scream, but no voice escaped his throat as the body slammed into the ground. Crimson pooled in the snow around the broken boy and Fai let out a keening wail as lifeless eyes stared accusingly at him. He staggered over to the fallen boy and fell to his knees on the crimson-stained ground.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Reaching over with trembling hands, he pulled the lids over sightless amber eyes. "I'm so, so sorry, Syaoran-kun." Tears burned trails down his cheeks as he gathered the broken boy in his arms and cradled him to his chest. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I couldn't save you. I'm sorry."

Fai sobbed harder as he buried his face in Syaoran's hair. With a deafening crack that echoed all around him, Syaoran's corpse shattered into thousands of shards, which then dissipated into nothingness, leaving him alone, kneeling in a frozen pool of blood. Clutching his hair, he wailed. "I'm sorry."

The wind began to blow, kicking up snow as it swirled around him. Fai watched, wide-eyed, as it formed an icy wall in front of him. This had never happened in his nightmare before. The wind blew around pink sakura petals that began to accumulate in one place on the other side of the wall, taking the form of a beautiful girl.

Sakura-chan...he gasped, clambering to his feet as he raced towards the princess, fearful of what he might see next. On the other side, Sakura hurried towards him, her bare feet slapping against the snow that had turned pure at her appearance. His surroundings slowly shifted from the Valley of Sinners to the snowy mountains that had once surrounded Ruval Castle. The sudden shift gave him pause as he looked around before turning his attention back to Sakura, who was stuck on the other side of the ice wall.

She appeared to be saying something as she beat her hands against the wall, but no sound reached him. The world began to change once more, but instead of turning into something new, everything began to fall away, leaving behind only empty blackness as he felt himself begin to wake. Sakura's attempts at getting through the wall grew more frantic, but he woke up before she could reach him.

The shift from sleep to wakefulness left Fai feeling disorientated as he lay upon the flimsy mattress. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he swung his legs off the side of the bed and sat up, mind whirring from the turn his nightmare had taken. He'd been having that dream for nearly a week but it was the first night that something had happened beyond the point where Syaoran's corpse had shattered in his arms. Sakura's appearance was an unexpected but pleasant surprise, providing him with a momentary escape from the nightmares his sleeping hours had turned into.

Even if it had been for a few moments he had gotten to see a familiar face, unmarked by the scars of his mistake. No. That wasn't right. Sakura was the one most affected by his failure to save
Syaoran, but the girl in his dream had been just something conjured by his tortured mind. Sighing heavily, Fai tried not to dwell on his dream as he pulled on a shirt and ran a hand through his tangled hair.

Frustration constricted his ribs, making it hard for him to breath and he stood, filled with restless energy. It had been far too long since he made that promise to avenge Syaoran's death, but he hadn't been able to act on it. None of his attempts at escape had worked and instead he was left at the mercy of his captors, the very people who were responsible for Syaoran's death.

Moreover, he still hadn't been able to figure out a way to disable the nanites in his body, and that prevented him from making further escape attempts. Not for lack of trying, though. He had tried the same trick he'd done with the Cerellium compounds by using his magic to isolate the nanites and overpower them with his magic. Unfortunately, whatever Akira had done to his brain kept him from controlling his magic in such a precise and focused manner, and anything less than that meant the risk of triggering the nanites to explode. Which was something that Fai wasn't willing to risk.

The only thing he could do was bide his time. He had no choice but to wait for the final event to end and Akira to take out whatever she had stuck in his brain. Fai slipped out of his room and jogged towards the cafeteria. Maybe if he was lucky, he had slept in and the metal doors barring the passage that led there were already raised, as was the norm during mealtimes. Maybe he could even find Roy and talk to him. Kamui was barely civil around him, and Lupa had vanished altogether since that night.

Fai still wasn't sure what had come over him for him. He'd slept with Lupa, but he knew he needed to talk to her about what had happened. He had only seen the Lupine once in the past two days, and even then there hadn't been a chance for them to talk. She had been leaving the training room with Kyle just as Seisirou had been leading him and Kamui there for practice. He hadn't been willing to risk drawing attention towards what had happened with so many witnesses, deciding instead to track her down after training. Sadly, she had vanished altogether.

He chalked her disappearance up to whatever mysterious task Kyle had assigned her. He hadn't liked the fear that had been barely masked by her angry façade that night he'd overheard her conversation. With no way to find out how she was holding up without cluing someone else in to what had happened, Fai could only hope that she was okay.

But even if she wasn't, he would find out that evening when they were scheduled for another televised match.

Fai cast one last glance at the metal doors barring his way before he turned on his heels and headed towards the only place he knew would be accessible at that time. As he neared the practice arena, he heard the sounds of someone already inside. In the time he had spent so far being on the same team as Lupa and Kamui, he had learned that practice arenas were always assigned to the individual teams to prepare for the final event. There were cameras installed in these rooms, recording all of the practice sessions that were compiled into specials that were aired during the lull in between death matches.

Realizing that the grunts coming from the practice room were too feminine to belong to Kamui, Fai hurried his pace. The door was left slightly ajar but instead of hiding outside, Fai pushed and walked right in. In the midst of a few badly mangled practice dummies, Lupa was practicing by herself. His breath hitched when he caught sight of the way her body moved with fluid grace as she flipped and twisted on the floor, fending off blows by an imaginary opponent. Her deadly claws slashed through the air as she went on the offensive, gouging the wood off the practice dummies. Lashing out with her right leg, she snapped one dummy right off its support and flipped backward,
vaulting on one hand to land back on her feet. Without pause, she rushed towards the next dummy, lashing out with her claws to rip the head from its body. Spinning around, she kicked the dummy in the chest, breaking it off its support. The torso crashed into the floor as Lupa relaxed her stance momentarily before she exploded into a flurry of movement.

Fai watched, impressed by the display. At first glance, it appeared chaotic and uncontrolled, but there was an underlying precision with which each strike was carried out. It was mesmerizing, like watching a dance. Each move was carefully planned and executed, seamlessly flowing from one into the other as she kicked and slashed her way through the practice dummies. The power she packed into a single blow appeared to be more than enough to kill a grown man and Fai wondered for a moment if she was imagining her handler's face as she struck. The last of the mannequins fell and Lupa stilled in a crouch. She was breathing hard, but if Fai hadn't been able to hear her, he would have thought her to be carved out of stone.

"That was amazing." Fai clapped his hands as he approached the arena.

"Glad I could provide you with some entertainment," Lupa said, her body fluidly unfolding from the crouch as she turned to face to him.

"That's not what I meant," Fai said, stopping next to the boundary markers as he made note of the hostility in her tone. It was the way she had always spoken to him, so it shouldn't have surprised him, but it had. Maybe he had been expecting a slight change after what had happened between them.

Lupa stalked over to him, clearly holding a different opinion. "Oh, I know exactly what you meant," she hissed. "Now, why are you here?"

"You h-h-haven't been coming for meals," he said, realizing that she appeared to be in a worse mood than usual. "I thought that maybe you were—"

"Don't tell me you were worried about me, Pretty Boy," she snorted. Fai frowned. "I can take care of myself."

"I can see that," he replied, tilting his head towards the carnage behind her.

"What do you want?" she demanded, pulling her lips back in a sneer. What did I do to make her so angry with me? Fai wondered. Fighting a frown, he looked back at Lupa, noting how the sclera in her eyes were still Lupine-black.

"I wanted to talk."

"There is nothing to talk about." Her sneer grew more pronounced as she drew closer, making Fai back into the boundary marker.

"Nothing to talk about?" He frowned. "L-L-Lupa, what h-happened that night—"

"Nothing happened that night," she growled, baring her teeth as her features slowly grew more wolf-like.

"That didn't feel l-l-like nothing," Fai argued. "I completely l-lost control, otherwise I wouldn't ever...

"Fuck the crazy bitch?" Lupa said, tilting her head back to stare down her nose at him.

"I didn't say that. I wanted to know if it was the same for you."
"I thought it would've been pretty obvious, but maybe you're more damaged than I thought," Lupa said as she walked her claw fingers up his forearm, resting them lightly against the crook of his elbow. "Sometimes when two people sleep together, all they're looking for is a good lay," she said in a condescending tone as she trailed her hand along his thigh and pressed up against him. Fai caught her hand before she could trail it inwards. Lupa grinned as she took a step back and freed her hand from his grip. "From the look on your face, it looks as if you thought it meant something."

"So that's all it was? An act?"

"What?" Lupa gave a harsh bark-like laugh that was cruel and vicious, the sound grating against his eardrums. "Did you think there'd be something special between us now just because we screwed each other?"

Fai clenched his jaw as anger curled in the pit of his stomach. "You used me."

"Don't think so highly of yourself, Berserker." Lupa's expression turned cold as she crossed her arms and looked at him through narrowed eyes. "We both used each other. I saw the way you looked at me when you thought I wasn't paying attention. Frankly speaking, you're not so bad to look at yourself, so I figured I might as well get it out of the way."

"What happened that night didn't feel like a simple 'getting things out of the way' fuck," Fai hissed, recalling the way he had lost control. No matter how badly he had been lusting after her, his loss of control couldn't have just been lust. He knew himself better than that.

"You're still hung up over that?" Lupa snorted as she pushed past him and started for the door. "I have no idea why it can't get through to that addled brain of yours, but none of it meant anything. Let it go, Berserker." She paused at the threshold of the training room to throw him one final glance. "In here, only idiots get emotionally attached. If you want to help our masters increase their ratings by adding a romantic twist, be my guest. However, I suggest that you leave me out of it."

And then she walked out, leaving Fai alone, confused, angry and —strangely enough— hurt. Was what she said really true? Had he expected things to change between them? She was attractive in an indescribable way. But that was all it was. He wasn't foolish enough to believe anything could have developed between them, despite what Lupa had claimed about his feelings for her. Though her outright dismissal of what happened didn't sit right with him. Fai knew something more than lust had been at play that night. And the way Lupa had shrugged it off led him to believe she knew the truth. She had pulled on a brilliant mask, but Fai had worn those long enough to spot one on another face. Lupa was hiding something. Of that he was certain. All he now had to do was figure out what it was and how it was related to his loss of control that night.

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Fai studied Lupa as she sat alone at the corner table in the cafeteria. She was picking at her food, barely touching anything on it as she stabbed at it with a plastic fork. In fact, if he wasn't mistaken, she looked a little sick. Fai frowned at that. She had appeared to be in perfect health just a few hours ago, but now she was sullen and distracted as she picked at her lunch. Not that he had any doubts before, but seeing her so out of it that she hadn't even noticed Fai staring at her yet was proof enough that there was something on her mind.

What are you hiding, Lupa? His eyes narrowed as she pushed away the tray and stood up in an abrupt manner.

"You really need to give up on her, my friend," Roy said as he slid into seat next to him, startling Fai out of his observation. "If you want to make it out alive you need to set your priorities straight.
Fai picked up the blood bag and extended his fangs to bite into the plastic tubing. Blood gushed into his mouth, cold and stale but invigorating nonetheless. He quirked a brow in the man's direction, knowing full well that his eyes would have turned to their customary catlike gold, though Roy didn't flinch away from the gaze of a predator. He was wearing an unusually serious expression, something Fai hadn't been witness to so far. The resulting emotion that made his heart beat just a little quicker was far too close to unsettling for Fai's liking.

"I mean it, Fai," Roy added, lowering his voice as he looked around to ensure no one was listening to their conversation. The cameras along the wall whirred softly as they panned the room, but no one else appeared interested in what was going on at Fai's table. Fai gulped the mouthful of blood before pulling the bag away from his lips, silently inviting Roy to elaborate. "She has a reputation in here, and I'm telling you, Lupa is not the kind of girl you want to get involved with."

"Why?"

"You must have heard of the Shah family, right?" Roy sighed, piquing Fai's curiosity. Fai had heard of no such family, having been captured as soon as he had arrived in this world, but Roy continued without waiting for confirmation. "Not a lot of people know this, but La Lupa is their youngest daughter, Madiha Shah."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Fai questioned, filing away Lupa's real name in his memory. Madiha Shah, huh?

Roy looked at Fai as if he was stupid for even asking such a thing, but he continued with his explanation regardless. "She was bitten at a very young age when a rogue Lupine broke into their family home while her parents and elder brother were away. I lied when I said I didn't know how she evaded detection for so long. Her family went to extreme lengths to keep her condition a secret, but she was a part of high society. I met her at a dinner gala once, a few years back. Looking at that girl and this one, you wouldn't believe they're the same person, but even then, I could tell there was a ferocity to her that would match no others.

"The first year she was here, hers was the only team to come out of the final event alive," Roy said, his tone hardly louder than a whisper as he pushed around the tasteless gruel with his spoon. "Her Handler decided to put up the other two members for auction and she was kept behind. She got passed over for her teammates the second year too. So you know what she did in the finals last year?" Roy looked up to hold Fai's gaze, still looking serious. "She bit both her teammates after winning the final match, to make sure she wouldn't be skipped out on the auctions. That part wasn't televised but let's just say the directors felt she couldn't be sold off after a display like that."

"The teammates died?" Fai glanced towards the table Lupa had occupied but it was empty.

"The Vampirosa did. I'm not sure what became of the Elemental. Maybe he was sent to R&D or maybe he was auctioned off. All I'm saying is, be careful. Just because you're on the same team doesn't mean you'll be safe in the finals."

"I see," Fai nodded as he finished off his blood bag. He saw Seishirou appear in the side corridor and stood. "I h-h-have to go get r-ready for the match."

Half an hour later, Lupa opened the match. Fai was strongly reminded of Roy's warning when five minutes into the fight, she snapped her opponent's neck and their team was declared the winners.
Is Fai right in suspecting that Lupa might be hiding something? If so, any guesses on what that might be? I'd love to hear your thoughts so don't forget to leave a comment. :)

Chapter End Notes
Kurogane eyed Fuuma and the Scavengers' leader as they conversed laughing at some joke he could not hear, before his attention flickered towards the woman standing a few paces behind the leader, Souma. Kurogane had been a little surprised when she had emerged at the Liberalists headquarters in a burst of black smoke a little before midnight, but having already seen so many alternate versions of people he knew, he barely twitched at her appearance. Souma had offered a polite greeting to the room's occupants which included Tomoyo, Nixon, Fuuma, and Kurogane himself. He didn't miss the way Souma's attention lingered on his mechanical limb, but she had the tact not to comment. Given Nixon's tendency to annoy the leader with his presence alone, Souma had requested for only Fuuma to accompany them to the Scavenger base and Tomoyo had conceded despite Nixon's protests.

Souma had brought them to an underground cellar with a narrow, barred window near the roof. A sliver of moonlight split the dark shadows on the floor until Souma switched on the lights, and Kurogane's eyes watered at the sudden brightness. He scowled at the amused look Souma threw his way, her gaze once more dropping to his mechanical arm before she turned away. Scowl deepening, Kurogane crossed his arms and waited for the Alpha's arrival, taking the time to observe the cellar. Thick metal bars sealed the way towards the stairs, though the door leading that way was left open. Chains as thick as the bars were attached to a single link drilled into the floor ending in shackles on the other side. Looking around, he noticed that these chains were drilled into the floor at regular intervals with enough distance between them that whatever they held would be unable to reach the next set.

Kurogane barely twitched when the leader turned out to be Touya, an alternate version of the king of Clow. Fuuma strode over to greet the man while Kurogane held his spot.

"So this is the daring Kuanos," Touya said as he turned away from Fuuma and cast a predatory grin at Kurogane. His eyes gleamed with a hungry light as his gaze flickered to Kurogane's prosthetic arm, and Kurogane's scowl deepened in response. Unease settled in his and he grit his teeth to keep from lashing out at the man. His prosthetic limb had drawn attention in the worlds they'd traveled to before, but somehow, Touya's attention made Kurogane want to snap. "Something tells me that has quite a story behind it." Touya smirked as he offered his left hand for a shake.

"One I'm not going to share," Kurogane grunted, staring evenly at the proffered hand until Touya retracted it, still grinning wolfishly.

"No need to get touchy," Touya chuckled. "If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine by me. I just hope you're not too attached to it."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You'll see soon enough." Touya waved dismissively as he turned to Fuuma. "Souma can drop you two back in the morning. We've got a room set up for you. I doubt you'd want to be here for what comes next."

"In that case, I'll be taking my leave for the night." Fuuma nodded. "Good luck, Kuanos. You'll
Touya waited until the man had disappeared with Souma before returning his attention to Kurogane. "Any time you're ready, Kuanos," he said, gesturing towards the set of chains next to Kurogane's feet. "I'd recommend taking off your jacket and shirt before you put them on though. I don't think you brought any spare, did you?"

"Like hell I'm going to put them on," Kurogane snapped.

"Then I'm afraid there won't be any transformations happening tonight," Touya replied, a hint of frost creeping into his tone despite his pleasant expression. Kurogane's hair stood up on end as the aura around the man darkened to something unnatural. It was similar to what he'd noticed around the mage whenever the idiot had let his vampire side loose in a fight, but something about what surrounded Touya rippled danger. "I've tried being welcoming to you, Mr. Kuanos, but you seem to have a problem with me. Now, normally I couldn't care less what that was. Tomoyo has requested my help and I fully intend to fulfill that request, but not by risking my family. So either you put those chains on or Souma can escort you back to your headquarters."

Kurogane glared at the man but Touya stared back evenly until Kurogane grit his teeth and shrugged off his jacket. Pulling off his shirt he knelt on the floor and reached for the chains.

"Before I took over," Touya said as Kurogane snapped the first shackled around his right ankle, "this is where The Company used to hold Lupines when they weren't working in the mines. It doesn't matter if you're transformed or not—these chains are strong enough to hold Alphas. This is the safest place for you to undergo your first transformation."

Kurogane said nothing as he snapped the second shackle around his other ankle.

"Leave your prosthetic arm free," Touya said, stopping him. Kurogane switched hands and put it around his flesh arm instead which left behind two shackles still. "You still need to put on that one around your neck. It'll keep you from hurting yourself as you turn."

Biting back the disgust he felt at tying himself up like an animal, Kurogane put on the collar, which restricted his movements far more than the other shackles put together. The chain on it was only long enough for Kurogane to be able to sit upright once the metal had locked around his throat. It hung loosely around his neck, no doubt meant for something bigger, but it did its job in restraining him.

"What now?" Kurogane raised his chin in defiance as he heard the sound of footsteps descending the stairs behind the Lupine. Had the bastard invited spectators to witness his transformation? "Now Mr. Kuanos, we begin," Touya said as he turned and tossed a set of keys to the newcomer as he swung the barred door lock clicked in place as Touya twisted the keys and the newcomer moved out of the shadows into Kurogane's line of sight.

"Kid..."

"You're alive." The words were past his lips before he could think on it, only belatedly realizing that the kid wouldn't be able recognize him in disguise. He couldn't risk letting the Alpha know that Kuanos was in fact Kurogane, given that Steel had known Touya when he'd been alive. Though, he could probably talk to the kid alone later on and explain the situation if he could clue Syaoran in to who he really was. The kid would recognize the way he spoke at least. "Kid, is the manjuu with you?"
Syaoran looked at him, but with the way his eyes turned glassy, it felt as if the kid was looking through him. Which didn't make sense at all. The kid was smart enough to make the connection. He knew he couldn't have mistaken the kid for an alternate because he had seen the boy with the mage all those weeks ago. And if the Cavahall's original Syaoran had been alive, they wouldn't have been able to come there. So why was the kid looking at him without a spark of recognition? Despite his new face, Kurogane still had the mechanical limb and his eyes. The kid should have shown some comprehension instead of that horrible glassy stare. His expression mirrored the lost look the princess had gotten whenever she'd been about to recover a memory of the kid.

"You know him from somewhere, Syaoran?" Touya's question was directed towards the kid, who appeared to shake himself out of his stupor and turn his attention towards the Alpha.

"I've never met him before."

Kurogane's heart sank as he caught sight of the strange characters tattooed to the boy's collarbone. The Company did this to him.

"When did you find him?" Kurogane demanded as he made to get up, belatedly remembering the collar around his neck when he stumbled and landed on his knees.

"I really don't see how that is of any relevance to you," Touya replied. Kurogane clenched his fists to keep from striking the man. Alpha or not, he was really stretching the limits of Kurogane's patience.

"I know him," he snapped. "He can't remember me, but I know who he is. We're traveling together. Now tell me, when did you find him?"

"Syaoran has been a part of the Scavengers for over a year now," Touya said. "You must be confusing him with someone else. He grew up in Cavahall and as far as I know, he's never traveled. There aren't many places to go beyond the wastelands after all."

"Bullshit. I saw the kid The Company's custody a few weeks ago. He's got their tattoo," Kurogane said, not missing the way the kid's hand strayed to his chest, resting lightly just over his heart.

"I really hope you're not insinuating that I'm a liar, Mr. Kuanos," Touya said as he came to tower over him. Touya's tone remained civil, though it carried the barest hint of a growl, a silent warning for Kurogane not to make things difficult for himself.

"I'm not insinuating anything." He scowled, noting the way the kid had absently begun to massage the spot above his heart. "I want to talk to him once we're done here."

Touya's eyes flashed as features shifted into something halfway between a wolf and a man.

"Didn't your friends warn you about crossing an Alpha on a full moon?" he growled, sharp canines gleaming in the moonlight as he crouched in front of Kurogane. "The decision to talk rests with Syaoran himself." Touya's savage grin was all teeth before the Lupine lunged for him. Reacting on instinct, Kurogane raised his free arm to block to snapping jaws only for Touya to bite into the mechanical arm and snap the elbow joint in half.

Sharp needles of agony shot through the nerves in his shoulder as the electric synapses went haywire. Kurogane bit back a cry as white flashed before his eyes. Touya spat out the destroyed arm before grabbing hold of the remaining limb in his maw, tearing it right out of the socket. Kurogane jerked back in shock only for the collar to jerk him to a halt before he could get away. Amber eyes glowing, Touya spat out the remains of his arm, yanking him close with the chain on his collar. "If you survive, you won't need that anymore."
And that was all the warning Kurogane had before teeth tore into his shoulder. Poison seared through his blood, and he burned as agony ripped through him. He could feel the blood flowing down his side even as the venom spread through his veins. It ripped him apart, like thorns tearing him apart from inside out. He tried to swallow a scream and barely succeeded. Unbidden, a groan slipped past his lips as he lost control of spasming muscles and fell on his mangled side. Lightning shot through his nerves, overwhelming all his senses as the poison sank into his bones, robbing him of the sense of passing time. Every cell in his body was aware of the moonlight washing across him, stretching and tearing and mutating beyond what he had been born as.

His body burned with fever, the cold floor smeared with his blood providing no relief even as he writhed and convulsed. He dug his nails into his palm as his resolve to hold back his cries weakened with each bone that broke. He could feel his skin crackling, shrinking like paper in a fire pit, flaking away like ash as something wrong wrong wrong took its place. Garbled cries that were half human, half animal slipped past his lips when his ribs started to break and oh Kami, it was a hundred times worse than the time he had lost his arm. His heart threatened to give out as it struggled to pump the venom that ate through his veins, rending and ripping away everything he was and there wasn't enough air and he was choking and dying and the world was nothing but fire.

Eons passed between each breaking bone and he couldn't breathe and his chest was nothing but a thorn-filled mass. His irregular pulse pounded in his ears, adding to the pathetic whines that filled the air and there was something wrong and he wasn't supposed to be this way. Darkness danced at the edges of his vision, tantalizing, yet out of his reach as the agony ripping through him pulled him back. Each crack was followed by a pitiful whimper as he felt it shift, bit by painful bit beneath his skin. Something new was taking shape in his mind, scared and angry and full of hurt and it was not right not right not right...He was a mess of emotions with no name and the world was wrong and then slowly it wasn't. The moon dropped lower in the sky, the first rays of sunlight touching the horizon as the world was made right again and the Lupine pushed off the cellar floor.

Standing on all fours, he threw back his head and howled. His ears pricked. He could hear a rustle. And breathing. Slowly drawing closer. His nostrils flared and his nose twitched as he smelled the air. Damp, mildew and blood. But now there was a new scent. Like wet earth and danger.

He gave a low, threatening growl. He turned his ears towards the sound. He could hear the Other breathing. Harsh but steady as a powerful heart pumped blood. Dirt crunched beneath feet, the Other drawing nearer. He growled in warning.

"That's enough out of a mutt like you." The Other made strange sounds in the growl. But he knew what they meant.

Hackles rising, he bared his teeth and snarled. The Other was like him, yet he moved on two legs. He shifted, something heavy circling his paws and restricting his movements. Sound of jangling filled the air but he paid it no mind. He was strong. He could break free and tear apart the Other. Power, danger clung to the Other, but it wasn't enough. The Other shouldn't be there.

"I said that is enough, Kuanos," the Other growled.

The Other pushed through the cage, a high screech filling the air. It hurt his ears. He snarled a warning and scratched his claws against the stone. The Other drew closer and he narrowed his eyes. Bending his knees, he settled into a low crouch. There was no fear in the Other. Only arrogance and superiority and a sense of danger.

"Can't say I'm opposed to putting you in your place." More sounds. He held his breath and stilled, stalking his prey. "Just remember, I did try doing this the civilized way."
The Other stepped in his range and he pushed off the ground with a snarl. The air whistled past his ears as he flew but the weight around his throat jerked him mid-attack. Something hard shattered his ribs and he crashed into the floor. His ears rang painfully and he let out a whine.

"Mutts like you don't stand up to Alphas," the Other snarled. Claws grabbed the scruff of his neck and he shrank back. The aura of danger surrounding the Other had intensified, and he knew what the Other was. The Other was stronger, an Alpha. *His* Alpha. He could not win against the one that turned him. It could not be done, his instincts screamed, and he listened. His ribs slowly mended themselves, fixing the damage dealt by his superior's single strike. He could not win against the Alpha.

"That's right," the Alpha said without letting go. "Now change back."

Change back? The fire and pain was still fresh in his mind. He whined at the thought. He could do it. He could turn into the two-legged creature as his Alpha had, but it would *hurt*. He flattened his ears against his skull in submission and let out another whine.

"What's this?" his Alpha growled and dug his claws deeper into his neck. "Shying away from a little pain? If you didn't want to hurt, you shouldn't have asked me to turn you, Kuanos. The pain is a part of who you are. Now change back or I will *end* you."

But it would hurt. His bones would break and he would burn. Everything would be wrong and not right. There would be an eternity of pain before the world could shift.

"I was told you were brave, but you're just pathetic. And pathetic has no place in my pack, Kuanos. Remember why you chose this path and change back or die!"

Remember? A pair of startling blue eyes flashed in his mind, followed by an amber and a green pair, an echo of laughter.

*Family...*

The mage and the kid and the princess. That was right. He'd chosen this for them. Because the mage was trapped and needed his help. But he wouldn't be able to help the idiot if he was dead. He had to change back because he'd *chosen* this path. He was not going to die here. Not now. Not before he had saved the idiot.

Growling low in his throat, he reached for the part of him that was just like his Alpha and latched on. His world dissolved into agony but he held fast. He couldn't die here. Not like this. The mage needed him to stay alive.

An eternity of agony swallowed him whole, but he did not let go, clinging to the memory of the mage and the kid and the princess. There was fire and pain and he wanted it to stop. Oh how he wanted it to stop. But he couldn't stop. Not when the idiot was counting on him. If he stopped now, he would have to do it all over again and the pain would still be there. He just had to hold on and it would be over. It would be—

Kurogane regained his senses as he lay panting on the ground. Shaking his head he sat up, pushing aside the ache in his muscle in favor glaring at Touya. The bastard had pushed him around like a worthless mongrel. Back in a human mindset, he could quickly process what Touya had done when Kurogane had been transformed. The bastard had come downstairs, fully human, masking the aura of an Alpha behind human flesh. To the wolf's senses, it had been just another wolf. A wolf coming into his territory and so he had acted to defend it.
And then just as he had charged, the bastard had partially transformed to confuse and subdue him. His reaction to an Alpha's presence had been instinctive. Even now he could feel that presence of danger but shielded by his human mind, the wolf's instincts were muted. And so, he lashed out with his fist, hearing the satisfying thwack of his knuckles meeting the other's jaw.

"That's for my arm," Kurogane spat as Touya massaged his jaw. For a moment, the *Lupine* appeared too stunned to react as he stared at Kurogane before throwing his head back in mirth. Kurogane glowered even as Touya wiped tears from his eyes and looked down at him. There was a hint of grudging respect in his eyes, something that surprised Kurogane immensely.

"It usually takes several tries for a newly-turned wolf to change back but you did it in one go," Touya said as he withdrew a key from his pocket and threw it towards Kurogane. "I have to admit, I'm almost impressed. Must be one hell of a reason for you to bulldoze through the transformation like that."

Without even thinking about it, Kurogane caught the key with his unshackled arm, realizing only belatedly that the limb was not metal and wiring but flesh and blood. Eyes widening, anger gave way to surprise. He stared at the tanned flesh reaching up with his shackled arm to feel if it was really there.

"Lupines can regrow severed limbs," Touya said, sounding amused at Kurogane's surprise, but Kurogane found that he didn't care. He had his arm back. Kurogane probed it all the way to his shoulder, feeling the motley of scarred tissue around the spot where he'd slice through with *Souhi*. "It leaves behind scars, but you wouldn't have chosen to become one of us if you cared about that."

Still a little dazed, Kurogane flexed the fingers of his unbound hand, marveling the way he could *feel* the movement. Touya was right, though. Kurogane didn't care about the scarring. For someone who had had to make do with a prosthetic, having his original arm back was more than he could have asked for.

"Syaoran has decided to talk to you after all," Touya informed him. "I still think you're mistaking him for someone else, but he has agreed to hear you out. Just don't take too long. Souma will be here with Fuuma to take you back soon."

-Syaoran couldn't help it. He stared at the strange man. He was all too aware of the grit digging into his skin through the thick material of his jeans, the cold stone leaching the heat from his body. But even so, he hung on to every word that Kuanos let slip and tried to picture himself in place of the boy this man claimed to know. It was a fantastic story, and he tried, he really did, to fill in the empty spaces in his memories with what he was told.

It didn't work.

He knew there were gaping holes in his memory, like missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Yet the pieces presented by this man, Kuanos, who claimed to know him, did not fit. This boy that Kuanos knew and the person Syaoran was rediscovering himself to be were world apart. Touya was right. This man was confusing him with someone else.

The story made sense in a twisted kind of way, but it didn't *feel* like his story. If what Kuanos claimed was true and he was the same Syaoran, then why did nothing click? Even with missing memories, there should have been a hint of something, a spark or a jolt or *anything* at all. As things were, hearing about Kuanos's journey was like listening to a bedtime story. It did not put him to sleep, but it had all the elements of a fairy tale. A princess in need of rescue, a young devoted
knight in shining armor, a disgraced warrior, and a good-natured magician. There was even a talking, magical creature to help the group on their quest.

Sure, he could believe the man about magic and distant dimensions vastly different from Cavahall. But if what Kuanos claimed was true, how had Syaoran ended up with the Scavengers? And what reason would every one of them have to lie to him? Why claim that he had lived his entire life in Cavahall? They had told him that he had lost loved ones and carved out a new home for himself here at the outskirts of the city. There was nothing for them to gain by lying to him. The holes in his memory made it hard for him to remember, but he knew the Scavengers better than he knew this stranger. And knowing what he did of them, they were good people. They had no reason to drag him into such an elaborate hoax.

True, Kuanos claimed to have lost touch with him and their mutual magician friend after arriving in Cavahall. But his only explanation for Syaoran's amnesia was the claim that The Company had done something. The Company was powerful, and they had held him captive- he'd have been an idiot not to know the meaning of the tattoo on his chest - but even they did not possess the power to take away someone's memories. Although...

A pair of feathers, green and brown, keeping the comatose Lupine alive in Emeraude's secret room flashed through his mind. He frowned in thought.

"The princess's feathers, what did they look like?" he asked. There was a possibility that Kuanos's story held the truth if the description of the feathers matched. Maybe he'd felt attracted to them because his subconscious had identified him as the Syaoran from the tale.

"They were white with red markings," Kuanos replied and Syaoran felt a pang of disappointment in his chest though he tried not to let it show.

"Not the same." Syaoran sighed as he stood and brushed off the grime from his pants. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kuanos but I don't think I am the person you are searching for."

"Kid, I told you," Kuanos said, sounding annoyed, "there's no way for two copies of the same soul to exist in a single dimension. We wouldn't have been able to come here at all if there was another you running around in the city."

"Maybe your friend never made it to the city in the first place," Syaoran replied, trying to keep his own irritation from showing. Despite the fact that Syaoran was not a 'kid' in any way, that was all Kuanos had called him. How could he trust a man who refused to acknowledge that Syaoran was not a child? At least with Emeraude, it made sense when she called him Little One. She was literally hundreds of years older than him. What excuse did Kuanos have? "What if your friend couldn't come to Cavahall because I'm still here? For all you know, the boy you know is still stuck in the space between dimensions waiting for you all to leave. You said it happened once before, didn't you? Maybe the boy is with your dimension hopper, unable to find his way into Cavahall because I'm not dead."

Kuanos opened his mouth to argue before closing it again with a snap. Syaoran could tell from the set of his jaw that his argument had made the man think. Which was a good thing because he was certain he wasn't the person Kuanos was searching for. Hearing footsteps approaching the top of the staircase, he inclined his head towards the man. "I wish you good luck with helping your Magirius friend, Mr. Kuanos."

He waited for man to acknowledge his goodbye, but Kuanos appeared lost in thought. Shaking his head, Syaoran turned away, nodding a polite good morning to Souma and Fuuma as he ascended the stairs. Given all that he had learned about the other Syaoran - and wasn't that an interesting
thought? Someone out there had the same soul as him - put things in perspective for him.

The princess had been too young to read the signs and try to mend her relationship with the boy she cared for. And then she had lost him. Syaoran might not remember loving Meiling, but he had cared for her deeply, according to Touya. It wouldn't be fair of him if he did not at least try to mend the gap in their relationship. As soon as he got off mine duty, Syaoran decided that he would sit down with Meiling and talk things out. Even if he lacked his memories of her, Meiling deserved for him to make an effort to regain what they had.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys enjoyed Kurogane's Lupine transformation. I suppose this chapter goes to show that there are no limits to what he's willing to sacrifice for the people he loves. Any thoughts on how different things will be for him now that he's a werewolf? He's got his flesh arm back but he no longer has crimson eyes. On the bright side though, after his near miss with Mokona last time, he's finally found Syaoran. Yay for a long awaited reunion... sort of... *sweatdrops* ahem. Anyhow, if anyone is interested in checking out what Fai's gladiator team looks like, head over to https://www.deviantart.com/nimmxx/art/Gladiators-526296531. I've drawn Lupa, Fai and Kamui in all their glory.
Ignoring the dull throbbing in his head, Kurogane stood in front of the mirror, resting both his hands on the table as he glared at the face worn by his reflection. Greasy, sweat-matted hair hung about his lean face in loose curls. Thanks to Masooma's spell, the sharp angles of his cheekbones looked just as alien in his reflection as the aristocratic haughtiness of his features. He's understood and accepted the need for it, yet he was still shocked every time he saw the mirror. The most unnerving change of all, however, was in the eyes that were a luminescent amber instead of crimson. A motley of scar tissue ringed his shoulder, marking the spot where his arm, his flesh arm, had regrown. His discarded shirt lay on the floor somewhere behind him with his jacket and shoes. He could feel the wood warming beneath his palms as he glared at the stranger in the mirror.

The room was dark, with the blinds pulled to cover the solitary window and the door locked behind him, and yet Kurogane's eyes watered as though he was staring into the sun. He could hear the rapid thumping of his own heart like the constant beating of drums. He could even hear the sound of shuffling feet at the other end of the corridor, much louder than he should have. A child let out a delighted shriek in the street four floors down and Kurogane flinched as though it had been right next to his ear. He clenched his jaw, frustration mounting at the way the grinding of his teeth sounded like the grinding of two boulders. Kurogane gripped the table, his nails tearing into the wood as the splinters dug into his fingers. He let out an aggravated snarl, letting go as he backed away.

This is not what I signed up for… he thought as his feet tangled with his discarded clothing, making him stumble into the edge of the bed. It screeched across the floor like a keening ghoul as he fell on the squeaky mattress. Closing his eyes Kurogane brought up his hands to cover his ears, the action providing him with no relief. The sounds were too loud, the light trickling in from the gap between the window and the curtains too bright. He scooted back on the shrieking mattress until his back was pressed against the headboard. Folding his knees, he buried his face between them. He had to get this under control. He couldn't help anyone, not the kid, not the manju, and definitely not the mage. The mage never flipped out like this. What the fuck is wrong with me?

He shifted in bed and the sound of rustling sheets made him wince. His stomach churned, and Kurogane drew in a deep breath, nearly throwing up at the foul chemical stench that assaulted his nose. Gasping, he swallowed the urge with some effort though breathing through his mouth provided him with no relief. Kurogane dug his fingers into his scalp, feeling the sharp sting of his skin breaking, but he did not let up. He needed something else to focus on. Something, anything except for the ever present, noisy world around him. Something foreign was crawling under his skin and it was too loud even inside his head. Get a fucking grip! he snarled at himself as the throbbing in his skull built up a cacophony of banging war drums. A growl that was part whine built in the back of his throat as he clenched his eyes shut.

"Kurogane, it's Masooma," the healer said from beyond the locked door. The sound of her voice was like a flock of screaming birds. To make matters worse, she began to strike the door with a hammer, or was that the sound of her knocking? Kurogane couldn't tell the difference as he curled up on himself, trying to focus on breathing through his mouth without throwing up.

"Nixon told me that you weren't feeling well when you got back. I've come to take a look. Can I come in?"

No. You're too loud... go away.

"Kurogane?" More hammers hitting the wood. What the hell was she trying to do? Break it down? Couldn't she see he'd closed the door for a reason? "Kurogane, are you okay?" The doorknob jingled as she tried to turn it. "Kurogane, open the door."

Shut up!

"Kurogane, open the damn door." The frantic pounding on the door reverberated inside his skull and the world shook, turning and tumbling all around him as he somehow ended up on the floor. When did that happen? The door blew inwards, a blast of freezing air battering against his sweating body and he cried out. No. He didn't need that. He could get it under control if she just left him alone. Couldn't she see she was making it worse? "Oh shit!" Freezing fingers on his skin, reaching through his muscles to dig into his bone as he convulsed. He pushed the hands away and a piercing whistle sliced through the air followed shortly by the sound of the world shattering around him.

"Hang on." Tendrils of magic wrapped around him, holding him in place as he struggled against them, trying to break free. The magic was constricting his chest. He couldn't breathe. Air. He needed air. What the hell was she doing to him? "You're having a sensory overload. You need to calm down. Focus on breathing."

Well, what the hell was he trying to do? He gasped, wheezing when he couldn't draw in anything. He was choking. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't— The tendrils of magic snaked into his chest, letting up on some of the pressure and blessed air filled up his burning lungs.

"Come on, that's it. That's it." The spell holding him down eased up and Kurogane lay on the floor, gasping for breath, shaking like an old man. "Good job."

Kurogane opened his eyes to find Masooma smiling down at him, though the expression did not quite reach her eyes. The light in the room had dulled, as had the sounds, though his vision was tinged with crimson and Masooma's voice sounded far away. He reached up with one hand to touch his eyes, surprised to have his fingers blocked by an impenetrable barrier a couple of inches away.

"It's a dampening spell," she said, still sounding as she was speaking from a long distance. "It's self-sustaining so you don't have to worry about it fading away, though I would recommend you leave it in place for a week or so."

"Why?" he asked, his own voice hoarse and scratchy, like thorns scraping the insides of his throat. Dust that he must have kicked up during his fit floated in the air, tickling his nostrils in a way that made him want to sneeze, but the earlier stench of chemicals had let up some. Wrinkling his nose, Kurogane shook his head in an attempt to get rid of the strange feeling of something blocking his nasal cavity. He could still breathe, but he could also feel the magical block. Masooma giggled and he shot her an irritated look. "What?"

"It's nothing," she chuckled, and unlike the smile before, the mirth sounded real.

"Well, if you're done laughing at me, I want to know what the hell just happened."

"You had a drastic reaction to the virus," she said as she sobered up, giving him a worried once over. "It's a good thing I came up to check on you when I did. It could have gotten real ugly, real
"What do you mean?"

"Over seventy-five percent of Lupine infections result in death," she said, offering him a hand. Kurogane ignored it, standing under his own power. A flash of hurt crossed her face, but Kurogane was too irritated to feel bad for the witch, and she averted her gaze. "You just experienced the primary cause of mortality."

"The sensory overload?" Kurogane frowned, repeating the term she had used earlier.

"Yeah." She nodded, rubbing one of her arms, and Kurogane was surprised to see a bruise the size of his fist blossoming on her pale skin. As he looked closer, he also noticed the rips in her shirt on her right shoulder, exposing the torn skin below. Her hair was in a disarray, loose strands having escaped from the knots she usually kept it in. The beaded clips that she usually wore to keep the knots in place hung loosely from her head, adding to her disheveled appearance.

"Oh hell…" Kurogane swallowed thickly, not missing the way Masooma tried to cover up her injuries. "Did I do that?"

"Don't worry about it." She shook her head, casting a quick healing spell that she directed to her wounded shoulder. Despite the damping spell working to tone down his senses, Kurogane still heard her sharp intake of breath as her breathing sped up, and yet she still offered him a watery smile for comfort. "It looks worse than it feels."

"Bullshit," Kurogane snapped, immediately feeling a pang of guilt when she flinched and took half a step back. Drawing a deep breath, Kurogane forced his roiling emotions to a corner of his mind. He could deal with those in private. "You saved my life, more than once. That's not something I take lightly, but don't lie to spare my feelings."

"I'm fine, really," she said again, still giving him that empty smile. The skin on her shoulder knit itself back together under the influence of her magic, and she directed the spell to the bruise on her arm next. Much to his surprise, she brought the spell to her ribs right after that, wincing as the magic fixed whatever damage he had inflicted there. "There. All done, see?" She dismissed the magic with wave of her hand. "You should take it easy for a couple of days, just as long as it takes you to get used to your new physiology. The dampening spell is designed to deteriorate on its own, so the change in your sensory input will be more gradual. If you experience persistent headaches though, you should come see me. Once you're feeling better, I'll arrange for your Lupine instructor to speak with you about your training. Sorry about the lock, by the way. I'll ask Nixon to send someone over to fix it for you later."

And with those words, she was gone. Kurogane watched her leave, not missing the limp in her steps as she exited his room. He thought about going after her, but before he could move to follow, he caught sight of the smashed tiles on the floor. Feeling his heart sink, he looked around the rest of the room and spotted one of Masooma's beaded hairclips next to the broken lamp. Clenching his hands into fists, he walked over and bent to pick it up.

In her hurry to leave, she'd probably not even noticed that it had fallen out. Then again, with the way he'd attacked her, was it all that surprising?

For a moment, he considered following her, just to see how much he had actually hurt her, but then the destruction he'd rained caused came into his focus. Shaking his head, Kurogane staggered back until he collided with the wall. He slid down to the floor, hitting the back of his head against the plaster as he clenched his left hand around the clip. The metal dug into his flesh and, for once, he
welcomed the pain.

"Fuck..."

Fai hid a frown as he bit into the blood bag, eyeing an armed guard as he marched past the table. Security had been upped by several levels as the final event of the Gladiator Tournament drew nearer. A stringent curfew had been implemented; the movement of the Unnaturals being kept on that floor was being strictly monitored and controlled. The duration of mealtimes had also been reduced to half an hour, three times a day, with all the gladiators being forced to share the hall. The overcrowding meant that fights between various teams broke out more frequently, which necessitated the presence of armed guards to discourage uncouth behavior. According to the warnings they'd been given, the additional security was also to serve as a deterrent against sabotage between teams.

Every spare moment outside of mealtimes and the seven hours of sleep allowed at night was taken up the handlers training their charges for the final event. Of the eight teams set to qualify for the finale, only one spot remained open, with the slot being awarded to an unqualified team that could either defeat an existing qualified team or gain the most popularity amongst the viewers to be voted in. As a result, televised matches between the qualified and unqualified teams had also grown more frequent.

The combined efforts of Seishirou and Kyle had managed to turn Fai, Kamui and Lupa into a somewhat functional team. All three of them were strong in their own right and more than a match for their opponents in one-on-one combat, which had been enough to help them qualify for the final event. But Fai knew that if they were to face a team that knew how to work together, they'd be in trouble.

Fai could hold his own against multiple opponents for a short while, even without the aid of his magic, but he had seen some of the opposing teams working together in the tag-team matches. He doubted the others would come to his aid if he was ambushed. Kamui still insisted on acting like a sullen teenager, and Lupa was passive-aggressive both inside and outside the arena, at least toward Fai. Their mutual dislike of Fai had given them enough common ground to work well with each other, though neither was eager to include Fai, and he had little hope of that changing in time for the final event to begin.

Because two members of the trio could work together, their handlers weren't too forceful about suggesting they include Fai, considering their team had yet to lose a single match. With the team at the top of the rankings list, the pair of handlers was happy enough not to interfere with the team dynamics, especially since antagonism amongst members caused the viewer ratings to shoot upwards. Or so Roy had informed him.

Lupa and Kamui absolutely hated him and had been trying their best to set him up for failure. Had Fai still had uninterrupted access to his magic, he wouldn't have had an issue with that, but the juvenile behavior of his teammates was going to get him killed.

Fai recalled the way Kamui had refused to tag in when Seishirou had expressly instructed them to work together and scowled at a passing guard in annoyance. If he had any hope of—

"What the hell are you looking at, Leech?" the guard barked as he came to a stop in front of Fai, tightening grip on the gun in his hands.

Fai regarded the man with a level stare, swallowing a mouthful of blood. Wiping his mouth with
the back of his hand, Fai watched the man squirm under his gaze. When the guard looked
dangerously close to exploding in anger, he said, "Nothing of consequence."

If the man had looked angry before, he looked positively murderous now. "Then know your place
and keep your gaze lowered, you piece of shit!" the man snarled as he pointed the muzzle at Fai's
face. Fai considered snatching the weapon from the man's hand and smashing it in his head before
dismissing the idea. That was something Kurogane would have done. Besides, Fai didn't fancy
getting locked up in solitary for his 'savage' behavior. Again. "Don't fucking look at your betters!"

It took considerable effort on Fai's part to look down at the man's feet, lowering his head in
submission as was considered 'proper' for The Company-owned Unnaturals. The cafeteria that was
quieter than the norm was now deathly silent. Fai could feel everyone's eyes on him. He knew
Lupa and Kamui were part of the onlooking crowd, as was Roy, but he did not expect anyone to
come to his defense. Expecting such of his teammates would be idiotic and though Roy had
become something of a friend, Fai did not expect nor wish for his help. And Roy probably knew
that too.

"At least it can understand simple commands," the guard scoffed as he snatched the blood bag from
Fai's hand. "Now kneel on the floor."

Fai clenched his jaw to bite back a scathing response, staying where he was. He knew resisting the
man would only make him angrier but at that moment, Fai didn't care. Cold, stale blood dribbled
down his face as the guard emptied the snatched blood bag on Fai's head.

"Are you deaf, you stubborn mule? Get down on the floor and kneel."

The guard smashed the butt of his gun into Fai's face and pain blossomed in his jaw. Clenching his fists in his lap, Fai
stubbornly remained where he was even as the taste of copper filled his mouth.

"I told you to fucking kneel, you bastard!" the guard yelled when Fai refused to react. "Do as I say
or I'm going to blow your useless brain out." The cold metal dug into his flesh as the guard pressed
the muzzle against Fai's temple.

"Leave the stubborn thing alone, Shawn," said a second guard, marching up to the man harassing
Fai. "Seishirou will have your head if you damage it."

'Shawn' scoffed, but did as the other guard had asked and lowered the gun. Grabbing Fai's hair, he
jerked him close enough to hiss a threat. "You won't always be this lucky, Leech."

Fai gave the man a predatory grin, his fingers twitching beneath the table as he wove an invisible
curse. He flashed his eyes to vampire gold as he locked his gaze on Shawn and let go of his hold on
the curse. "H-Have a pleasant day."

The guard jumped back with a yelp as though burnt before turning away with a glare and marching
off.

"You're either suicidal, or crazy." Roy hissed as he slid into a seat across from him a couple of
minutes later. Ten feet away, 'Shawn' gave a startled cry as he fell on his face and Fai grinned as he
met Roy's horrified gaze.

"Possibly both," Fai said in a conspiratorial whisper.

"What the hell... Did you do that?" Roy gasped.

"I did a l-lot more," Fai said, winking for dramatic effect as he grabbed the extra blood bag Roy
had fetched. That was nice of him. Fai thought as he absently cast the flavor enhancing spell on
Roy's dinner. "The guard won't be h-h-happy to wake up with boils in some very embarrassing places tomorrow morning. Or the unlucky streak that will follow h-h-him for the next seven days."

Roy's eyes bugged out at the declaration as the man gaped at Fai before shaking his head as he looked down at his meal. "You're insane and you've got a death wish. Great. That's really good to know. At least now I know you won't be sticking around for too long once the Finale begins."

Fai chuckled but refrained from replying and they both lapsed into silence. He looked down at the blood bag in his hands, recalling a thought that had been niggling his mind for quite some time. Three weeks had gone by since the night he'd spent with Lupa and despite sharing a table during mealtimes, he hadn't had an opportunity to talk to Roy about it. One of the patrolling guards who wasn't 'Shawn' passed them by and Fai waited until the man was halfway across the cafeteria before speaking, "Pyro, does L-L-Lupine blood h-h-have any unusual effects on vampires?"

"Not really." Roy shrugged, chewing on a spoonful of his goopy dinner. "It's pretty much the same as regular blood. Except for the whole rapid regeneration thing. Come to think of it, I bet that's why The Company uses Lupine blood to feed the Vampirosa."

"I see." Fai nodded, falling silent as another guard passed by their table.

"Why?" Roy asked, having waited until the guard was well out of earshot before placing his own question. "Are you and Lupa doing the whole blood-sharing thing now?" Roy asked, sending a crooked grin in Fai's direction, shaking his head in wonder when Fai ducked his head. "Lupines don't normally enjoy sharing their blood with the Vampirosa. I had no idea you were into kinky shit like that. Should I be worried about my virtue?"

"I am," Fai replied with a perfectly serious expression. Roy glanced over at him in surprise. Fai grinned internally. "But that's only the case with the r-r-really pretty ones. You and your non-existent virtue h-have nothing to worry about. Elementals are too unpredictable for my tastes."

Roy blinked, taken aback by the straight-faced admission before he understood what Fai had said and laughed.

"So he does know how to make jokes," Roy said, and Fai gave a goofy smile in return. "Make sure you take a shower before curfew. You look like a savage with all that blood in your hair."

Fai nodded, ducking his head to hide his troubling thoughts. He'd been certain he'd lost control because of her blood though he'd chalked it up to a property common to all Lupines. But if that wasn't the case, then what in the world had possessed him? There was one other possibility, though a part of him had hoped that not to be the case. Suppressing the urge to frown, Fai bit into the blood bag, knowing he had to conserve his strength for the task he had to accomplish once the curfew was in effect.

-A-

A freezing shower and thirty minutes after dinner, Fai entered his room. He discarded his soiled shirt in a corner just as the locking mechanism activated. He tried the doorknob once, to ensure that it was locked before he sat down on the floor in the middle of his room. Closing his eyes, Fai tried to clear his mind.

It had become a habit of his lately, to try and meditate in hopes of gaining better control over his magic, though his progress was negligible. Simple spells like the curse he had cast weren't that difficult, but when it came to complex spells, his control was worse than an apprentice with only a month of magical training.
It was frustrating and annoying and left him grumpy and prone to bouts of recklessness, like his actions in the cafeteria during dinner that day. This was the fourth time he’d intentionally provoked the guards, with the last two attempts having resulted with him being confined in solitary -a glorified name for a tiny cage- for well over a day each time.

He had also become prone to nightmares, though luckily, those were fewer than the time he had been trying and failing to learn healing magic back in Celes. Only this time, Fai knew he had no room to give up.

Dismissing the thought, Fai attempted to reach for his magic. The ebb and flow of power within him was weak, barely noticeable. What had once been an ocean of pulsing, thrumming energy was now a shallow pond barely a few feet across. It shifted and swirled inside him, sluggish to respond as Fai coaxed it to move around in his bloodstream. The tendrils of magic fizzled and hissed as they came in contact with the Cerellium, aiding the nanites in canceling the compounds.

Furrowing his brow, Fai directed the magic away from the Cerellium and into a small percentage of the nanites themselves. The effect was instantaneous as the Cerellium levels in his blood rose, attacking the magic that was disabling the targeted nanites. Digging his fingers into the palms of his hands, Fai pushed more magic into his bloodstream, all too aware of the steadily diminishing magic inside him as he held the targeted nanites in place. The temperature in his blood began to rise as the three-way war between Cerellium, nanites, and his magic drew out. He could feel the sweat soaking through his skin and clothes, dripping from the tips of his short hair, but he resisted the urge to shift as he pushed out more magic. It helped him map out the internal mechanism of the nanites and he focused on the parts where the explosive charges were loaded into the devices. With a silent snarl, Fai pushed everything he had accumulated over the course of the day into the charges, setting them off.

Crying out as spikes of pain shot through his right forearm, he fell on his side, gasping for breath as he waited for the ringing in his ears to stop. Eyes watering, he gingerly pushed himself back into an upright position with his uninjured arm. Wiping off the sweat dripping into his eyes, Fai inspected the swollen limb where he had set off the nanite charges. The skin had turn into a mess of black and blue from the burst blood vessels, torn muscle fibers, and burnt tissue. His arm had swollen considerably and every touch radiated a volley of pins and needles when Fai poked at it with a finger. He sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth and let his injured arm be. Damage like that would put a normal person out of commission for months, but for a vampire with accelerated healing, it barely lasted half the night.

With all the practice he had gotten with his nightly sessions in the past couple of weeks, Fai had gotten the healing time down to the last minute. Every night after his training or televised match, Fai retreated to his room to meditate, using his magic to discharge a small percentage of the nanites in his bloodstream. He had to have gotten rid of at least ten percent of the explosives in the past fortnight. He remained slumped against the bed for an hour afterward, waiting for the wound to heal enough that moving it wouldn't make him want to scream.

Fai leaned back against the bed frame in exhaustion, closing his eyes as he rested his head against the mattress. A weak laugh bubbled up his throat as his body struggled to fix the damage he had inflicted as his thoughts drifted back to his family. He wondered if Kurogane and Mokona had reached Sakura yet. He'd dreamed of the princess twice more since she'd first appeared to interrupt his nightmare, though they had always been separated by the impenetrable barrier. The second time she'd appeared, Fai had realized that it was the princess's spirit, reaching out across the dream realm in an attempt to communicate with him.

Even with as little access to his magic as he had, Fai could still identify spells when they were
being cast, and Sakura was most certainly using a spell to reach him. And each time she had appeared, her face only held concern for him. There was never any anger or hatred, which made Fai believe that she had yet to discover Syaoran's fate. It was the only thing that made sense. After all, as kind as she was, she loved Syaoran dearly, and Fai still expected her to hate him for stealing her beloved Syaoran.

**Heh, I thought I'd outgrown my self-loathing stage**, Fai thought wryly as he tentatively reached for his magic, only to discover that the pond had nearly dried out, struggling to regenerate. **Don't worry, Syaoran-kun. I haven't forgotten my promise. No matter how long it takes, I will avenge you.**

Confident that his magic would replenish by morning, Fai let his mind wander, his thoughts drifting to his teammates.

Despite the way they were treating him, Fai had been keeping an eye on both Kamui and Lupa. If for no other reason than to find something he could use to force them to work with him instead of against him. He hadn't found anything to help him, but he had made a few discoveries that had him concerned.

Three weeks had gone by since the night he'd slept with Lupa, and though he was no closer to figuring out the truth now, Fai had started noticing cracks in the mask she displayed to the world. She was always cocky and arrogant when people could see her, but more than once, Fai had caught sight of the defeated slump in her shoulders.

Being a master of façades himself, Fai could easily pick up on the flashes of fear in her eyes whenever she was called away. Judging from the way she went from a spitfire to a docile thing with just a warning from Kyle, Fai had surmised that the handler had something that he was using to blackmail Lupa with. The conversation he'd overhead between the two three weeks ago alluded to that much. Despite having spent three years in the hellhole that was The Company, Lupa's spirit hadn't broken. Kyle let her get away with a lot, though he did appear to exact compensation for the freedom he granted her during those sessions. And whatever it was that he had her do was something depraved even by handler standards.

Was it possible that she was being physically abused by Kyle? That could go a long way in explaining her erratic behavior. How she always tried to hold herself in a manner that made her appear bigger than she actually was, how she avoided being touched outside of the arena and always tried to keep others in her line of sight.

He hadn't wanted to consider it a possibility before but based on conversation with Roy at dinner, Fai was inclined to believe that Lupa might not have been in control of her actions that night. He wouldn't put it past Kyle to have drugged her, and when Fai drank her blood, the same drug got to him as well. Fai groaned, running a hand through his hair as he tugged at it in frustration.

**The theory could** explain why Fai had lost control that night. And why Lupa would have allowed things to go that far when she could barely be civil towards him most of the time. Of course, if this wasn't the first time it happened, it made sense for Lupa to be so closed off afterward. Kyle appeared to have been exploiting her weakness for as long as he'd had her.

It was quite a feat for her to have remained strong after so long. Fai had to admit that he found her quiet strength to be a rather attractive trait. She wasn't charismatic, but there was beauty in her tenaciousness. Fai pinched the bridge of his nose, breathing out noisily as he reined in his thoughts. As badly as he wanted to know what had happened that night, he couldn't keep obsessing over Lupa when he had an escape to plan.
As selfish as it made him seem, Fai was happy that Seishirou showed far more interest in Kamui. Seishirou, usually accompanied by Akira, called away the younger vampire at the oddest of times. Fai wasn't exactly certain what the duo put Kamui through while he was with them. The couple of times Fai had seen him return, Kamui had looked sickly and exhausted. Given his own experiences with Akira, Fai knew enough to guess that Kamui was being subjected to experimentation. Kamui's status as a pureblood Vampirosa ensured that he had a healing rate superior to Fai's, meaning that he could be subjected to worse experiments and still be healthy enough by the next morning to participate in their team activities. Both times that Fai had seen Kamui in such a state, the latter had gone out of his way to make things difficult for Fai, be it training or the televised matches, as though Fai had committed a great sin by catching him in his moment of weakness.

Fai understood how he must have appeared to his sire. Fai was a Hybrid turned by Kamui's blood, though Kamui couldn't recall having met Fai because that was still in his future. Fai wondered if Kamui had never said anything about Cavahall in Acid Tokyo to preserve the integrity of the timeline. Kamui was like Kurogane in that they both preferred being straightforward rather than cryptic. He had probably been instructed by Yuuko not to outright tell the travelers about their future, which was probably why Kamui had never said anything. Or maybe something bad happened to Fai here in the future and— no, he mustn't think that way. Fai had sworn to get out and so he would. Kamui must not have had the patience to think up of something cryptic enough to share with their group in Tokyo. After all, if Kamui got out of The Company and reunited with his twin, then Fai must have gotten out too. He was the one with the magic to traverse dimensions, after all, and the vampire twins could not have traveled on their own to Yuuko's shop.

Fai frowned, mulling over the words in his head for a moment. The vampire twins were acquainted with Yuuko Ichihara, having acquired the means to travel through dimensions from the Time Space Witch herself and not— Eyes snapping open, Fai sat upright as it clicked. Not Watanuki-kun's shop. Yuuko's shop!

Heart racing, Fai struggled to come to terms with the startling revelation. Yuuko had passed away well over four years ago and yet, here in the future, Kamui was younger than he'd been when Fai had first met him. It shouldn't be possible to travel this far into the past, regardless of who did it. The incident during Shura and Shara was due to the resonance caused by Sakura's feather in the present and past. Without another pair of feathers to fuel it, such an event shouldn't have been possible.

Mokona was capable of dimension traveling, not time traveling, so unless there was a strong anomaly capable of affecting reality in such a significant manner—

Fai's eyes widened as he let out an involuntary gasp. "Syaoran-kun..."

Syaoran was an anomaly. One that should not have existed after Fei Wang Reed's work was undone. And yet, his bonds with those in the realm of the living had been enough to allow him to keep on existing. The price had been for him to keep moving between worlds until he could find the means to produce a body for his father, thus ending his existence as an anomaly, for he would have had parents. Syaoran being stuck in a single world for a significant amount of time without succumbing to his fever could have done it. It could force reality to twist around itself in such a manner that his existence would not obliterate everything. The fix could not be permanent, but it made sense given everything that had happened.

Syaoran was a vampire now. It was entirely possible that contrary to what Fai had initially believed, Syaoran's vampirism had kept him alive well beyond the time limit he was originally allowed to stay in any world. And if he was alive, he was somewhere in Cavahall. And if he was still in Cavahall after all these weeks, his continued existence was fraying the threads holding
together reality itself. The laws of inter-dimensional temporal entropy would begin to weaken, causing a shift between relative timelines to acquire stability. Theoretically, it was possible for the instability to reach a point where the present of one dimension would be linked to the past of another instead of the relative present of the second dimension. In short, at some point in Cavahall's future the instability could reach a point where Cavahall's present would get linked to a point in Japan's past where Yuuko was still alive and granting wishes. That could explain the reverse age difference between the two versions of his sire, Kamui, that Fai was acquainted with.

But... if such an event were to occur, it would spell disaster for all of Cavahall at best and the integrity of reality itself at worst.

"Oh, Syaoran-kun." Fai couldn't contain his hysterical chuckles as he buried his face in his uninjured hand. "I'm so glad you're alive but... this is bad. This is r-r-really bad and I'm the only one who knows about it."

Lifting his head, he glanced at his arm. It was nearly healed. He prodded at it with his uninjured hand, biting back a hiss of pain before closing his eyes as he reached inside for his magic. Now that he knew Syaoran was alive, there wasn't time to waste. He had to get out of here and find his companions. And hopefully help them save the multi-verse from complete obliteration once again.

Chapter End Notes

Becoming a Lupine might not be as easy as Kurogane had initially thought it to be. On the other hand, Fai is being a secretly rebellious badass and he's made several important discoveries! Such as what might be going on with Lupa, why Kamui doesn't recognize him and now he knows that Syaoran is alive. That last bit might not be such a good thing in the long run, though. In the words of my beta 'Syaoran is going to break reality. Again.' xD unless of course Fai can get out of The Company and do something. I'd love to hear your thoughts on that so drop me a review :)
Out of Control

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mokona was a bundle of warmth in Yuui's jacket, pressed against his breastbone. He readjusted the scarf concealing the lower half of his face as he trudged through the streets of Cavahall. It was Yuui's latest attempt to keep the little Unnatural placated. The creature had grown restless over the past month at their lack of progress. Its injured arm had nearly grown back, and Mokona insisted that they expand the search area for its companions. Yuui knew where they were, of course. Fai was stuck in The Company's custody while Kurogane was masquerading around as Kuanos, a fact Yuui had become privy to after meeting with the man as himself, Xerxes, and Ashura. A fact that Yuui had decided not to share with Mokona.

The gunmetal grey layer of nanite clouds above Cavahall rippled. Thunder rumbled throughout the city as the weather patterns switched. A flash of lightning heralded the grey sludge-like rain falling from the heavens. Yuui huffed in annoyance as he glanced up at the sky before turning down the next street and heading back to the apartment.

"There are still twenty minutes and fifteen seconds left before we go back," Mokona reminded him in its tiny voice, and Yuui patted the pocket containing the little Unnatural. "Mokona is keeping track with one of Mokona's one hundred and eight secret techniques."

"I know, friend, but we need to get out of the rain. Ashura has a meeting with an important client in a few hours, and I need to make some preparations," he said, well aware of the face he shared with Fai's demented king. Mokona had told him everything after seeing Yuui in that particular disguise for the first time. It had been an informative talk, one that had revealed a lot about the way his twin had grown up. And for all the mistakes he had made, Fai had turned out to be an infinitely better person than Yuui. Just like his twin had been a better person.

Yuui fiddled with the beaded bracelet on his wrist, feeling the polished stones heat up between the pads of his fingers as his thoughts strayed to his long dead brother and his inter-dimensional counterpart. Faced with an impossible choice, his brother had given up his own life to save Yuui, and although the dimension-traveling Fai had at least tried to save his brother, Yuui had never been that brave. He'd hidden like a coward while his brother took the bullets and bled out.

Fai had been rescued from the valley by the afflicted king, but Yuui had had to rescue himself. Fai had been provided a place in the king's world while Yuui had carved one for himself. Despite his hard life, Fai had grown up a kind and compassionate soul. Yuui, on the other hand, was a deceitful, manipulative bastard who only cared about his own interests. He had connections across multiple dimensions, but those connections remained in their own worlds. Someone capable of constant movement between dimensions would be a lot more useful. Which was the only reason he had decided to help Kuanos rescue Fai from The Company's clutches. Yuui was not seeking redemption for what he had done to his brother, nor did he have any misplaced loyalty to this inter-dimensional copy of his twin. Cavahall had an overabundance of sentimental fools and Yuui was quite happy not to count himself among them.

Letting go of the bracelet, Yuui shoved his hands in the pockets of his coat and hurried his footsteps. The air filled with the stench of caustic rainwater, making his eyes sting behind the protective goggles. Yuui grimaced at the acrid taste against his lips as the polluted water dripped down his hair and soaked through the material of his scarf. He was glad for the waterproof jacket that kept himself and the restlessly shifting Mokona dry. Moving through the streets, he thought
over the plan Nixon had proposed during Ashura's introductory meeting with Kuanos.

The risk of exposure upon his person was minimal, considering that Ashura Veda was among the upper echelons of the society. If a slave he'd recently bought for purposes of the tournament were to turn rogue and vanish with one of The Company-owned Gladiators, how was he to know? Ashura Veda was no seer, after all. Director Bia and her cohorts would undoubtedly create a fuss, but Ashura could smooth things over with a generous donation to cover the loss. Things would go back to normal after a few months and Yuui would gain a new resource ready for exploitation.

Two blocks from his apartment building, his phone buzzed to mark an incoming email. Yuui took shelter under the awning of a storefront and brushed off stray drops of rainwater as he pulled out the phone. The Company's logo flashed proudly across the screen and Yuui felt the faintest stirrings of unease, though he quickly pushed it away. He was being paranoid. Ashura received weekly updates from The Company about his investments. His unease returned twofold once he read the subject, though. Pinching his lips, Yuui scrolled through the message, his expression turning stony by the time he had finished. Wordlessly, he forwarded the message to Nixon before shoving the phone back in his jacket.

Yuui covered the rest of the distance to his apartment in a near run. Slamming the door behind him, he wrenched off the scarf and goggles, quickly unbuttoning his jacket to let Mokona out.

He waited only long enough for the creature to hop to the ground before hurrying to his room to grab the voice modulator. Ignoring the sad look Mokona shot his way—complete with the droopy ears—Yuui stuck the modulator to his throat and dialed Nixon's number. Mokona waddled over to the sofa and clambered to the cushion next to Yuui as it settled for observing him. He could tell the creature had questions, but surprisingly enough it kept quiet, staring at Yuui with an inquisitive look that was uncannily human.

"The meet up isn't for another six hours, Mr. Ashura." Nixon's apprehensive voice floated through the speaker as soon as the call connected. He must not have read the email then.

"We seem to have a bit of a predicament on our hands, Mr. Nixon," he said, adopting Ashura's cultured tone, allowing only a hint of annoyance to show through.

"What is it?"

"I forwarded you a message I received from The Company's Gladiator Registration office a short while ago," he replied. "Have you looked at it?"

"Hang on, I just got it," Nixon replied and Yuui held back an annoyed grunt. "I'm going through it now and—what the hell? They've amped up on the screening process for External Gladiators. If they put Kuanos through these during the primary inspection, there's no way that we'd be able to smuggle in the nanites."

"Quite so."

"The initial round involves some heavy duty scanners. I think I could build the something to mask their presence, but the second round involves disruptor waveforms," Nixon said, sounding more upset the longer he spoke. "And they've moved up the screening dates to tomorrow morning. I won't have enough time to make suitable shielding on top of the masking tech. I'd built the nanites keeping the old protocols in mind. It had seemed like such a waste to go heavy duty while I was designing the shielding but... Oh man, I don't have enough time to do both. This is not good."

No, it isn't. Yuui frowned. He had hoped that Nixon could come up with a solution, but the
shortage of time couldn't be helped. Ashura couldn't protest about the change in registration time without arousing suspicion once Kurogane broke out Fai.

"This is... oh man... this changes everything. Why would they even do that? The screenings weren't due to begin for another five days!"

"I will try to have Kuanos moved to last place in the screening list, but even so, that will buy you three to four hours at most," he said, absentely petting Mokona on its head. "External Gladiators are to be handed over half a day before their trial match."

"I'll try to have him be ready by then. How soon can we meet?"

"I'm a little busy at the moment," he replied, glancing at the clock. The DNA rewrite would require three hours and he would need another hour to recover. The post-transformation pain was growing worse each time he triggered a change. A downside to using stolen experimental technology never intended for long term usage. But Yuui couldn't afford to have Ashura or Xerxes vanish without a trace. Not when so much of what he did relied on his alternate personas. Maybe once this ordeal with Kurogane and Fai was over, Yuui could get in touch with the owner of the wishing shop and gain a less damaging alternative than the nanites. But that was a ways off. For now, he would have to contend with what he had. "I'm afraid I won't be able to get away before the time we agreed upon."

"Oh... okay," came Nixon's distracted response. "I'll just uh... this gives me time to discuss our options with Tomoyo. I-I'll see you in the evening then."

"Rest assured, Mr. Nixon," he said, "I am still very much willing to sponsor Kuanos for the tournament."

"Thanks," Nixon replied. "But that won't be of any use if we can't get Kuanos past the screenings."

"Very well, I will see you in the evening. I do suggest you come alone."

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Kurogane sighed in relief as his bones snapped back in place. The wolf's mind grew dormant, though with each passing day the wall separating the human half of his mind from the wolf half crumbled further. In the week since he'd turned, Kurogane had been working hard to perfect his control over the transformations. And the better his control became, the more dominant his wolf persona grew even when he was human. It had gotten to the point where his senses—already bordering on superhuman before the transformation—were now well within the supernatural category.

As Masooma's dampening spell began to fade, Kurogane discovered that his body was still having trouble adapting to its Lupine physiology. Too proud to go to the healer after what he had done to her the first time she'd tried to help, Kurogane tried hiding the symptoms, though that only served to exacerbate his condition. He suffered from frequent fever spells that left him insensate for hours. By the time he admitted it to himself that he needed the healer's help, his body had grown too weak. He passed out on the floor long before he could reach the door. He came to with the blond Unnatural Fai had rescued bent over him, using her powers to fix his damaged body. His fever broke within the hour.

Not wanting a repeat, Kurogane pushed aside his pride and went to see Masooma, returning her broken hairclip with an embarrassed grunt as she looked him over. Threads of her magic wove through his body, checking for signs of damage and finding none.
"Looks like Chii has sped up the acclimation," Masooma had said with a fascinated smile as she'd eyed the blond Unnatural. "You should be able to get started on your training soon. I'll send a message to your Lupine instructor to meet with you in a few hours."

And so Kurogane was introduced to Remus.

"Now that you're a Lupine, you'll have noticed that your senses have gotten a lot sharper. Sounds are louder, the lights brighter, and pretty much everything is heightened, correct?"

Kurogane grunted in response. Even though the man was speaking in a voice barely above a whisper, the sound still shot straight to Kurogane's skull, forcing the onset of another migraine. The dampening spell had all but deteriorated completely. The sensory overload wasn't yet at a level that would plunge him back into a coma, but it was irritating all the same. He wondered if the mage had felt this bad after he'd had to become a vampire in Acid Tokyo. The idiot had been far better at masking his emotions when he wanted to hide something, though Kurogane could recall a few times he hadn't been quick enough. Was that one of the reasons why he'd been so cold towards him afterward? Had he been too proud to admit how much everything hurt? If that were the case, Kurogane's list of things he had to apologize for was definitely beginning to pile up.

"Here," Remus said as he held out a pair of glasses and a couple of round metallic buttons for Kurogane to take. "These are sensory dampers. Consider them a low grade version of Masooma's dampening spell. The glasses filter out the light and the ear buds lower the sound levels." He waited until Kurogane had put them in before speaking again, the words suddenly sounding soft and not at all like the piercing sound boring through his skull. "You'll learn to cope in time, but for now, these should help. Just don't grow too dependent on them or you'll be in trouble later."

"I won't," Kurogane grunted, instantly disliking the feeling of the foreign objects in his ears, even after the cold metal warmed up from his body heat.

"All right then, let's get going. There's a lot you need to learn if you want to have any hope of qualifying for the program," Remus said as he led Kurogane out into the streets. He laid out a rough outline of their training regimen as they walked through the Liberalist-occupied Cavahall. They would work on helping Kurogane get used to switching between Lupine and human forms until he could transform with barely more than a thought. After he mastered that, they'd work on finer transformation control and train him to use his now superhuman strength in a fight.

They moved deeper into the heart of the city, and Kurogane noticed a drastic change in his surroundings. While the area housing the headquarters was not in any form grand, the area Remus appeared to be leading him to was plain decrepit. The buildings were no more than blackened husks, windows and doors blown out with scorch marks and dark streaks of the chemical rains marring the brickwork like grotesque finger-paintings. A flea market had sprung up in the heart of this jungle of decaying buildings with stall owners hawking their wares. Kurogane wrinkled his nose at the sweet, rotting stench of perishables that had been dumped on the ground beside stalls of fruits and vegetables. The streets were overflowing with Unnaturals, though no one glanced at Kurogane more than once. Kurogane wasn't happy having to alter his appearance, though it was a relief to not be gawked at for a change.

They came to a halt outside a crumbling tower a little ways from the flea market. A myriad of smells assaulted his nose here, too, though unlike the market, the stench was that of chemicals and sewage. Kurogane looked up at the skeletal remains of what had to have been an office building; the structure looked too damaged to be of any use. He quirked a brow at Remus. "You want me to practice in there?" He was certain a drainage pipe was dumping its contents somewhere inside the building.
“No,” Remus shook his head and pointed out at a crumbling staircase leading into the ground just a few feet inside the building's entrance. "We're heading to the basement levels. The building may be destroyed, but the foundations and underground levels are still stable. This used to be one of The Company-owned offices. The lower levels housed Unnaturals while they were being processed for business. There's an entire section here capable of restraining Alpha level Lupines, so it's the safest place for you to learn."

They descended the stairs. Chemical smells were replaced with the musty stench of mildew, making Kurogane wrinkle his nose, though Remus did not appear affected at all as he led the way into the labyrinthine basement. They ended up in a copy of the cell where Touya had bitten him. The window was barred and there were chains bolted to the floor in the same spots, though unlike the cell at the Scavenger's base, the fresh scratch marks in the floor and lack of general filth indicated that this cell was still seeing a certain level of use.

"It'll be better if you're chained up." Remus gestured at the restraints, looking apologetic. " Newly turned Lupines are very... aggressive, and wish to exert their dominance. As an older Beta, I can handle myself if you were to attack me, but you'd be a risk to the civilians if you managed to get outside."

Kurogane appraised the lithe man. Remus was nearly a head shorter than him, with mousy brown hair and a scholarly disposition. He didn't look strong, but if there was one thing Kurogane knew, it was to never underestimate an opponent based on their looks alone. Still, the reminder that someone as harmless-looking as Remus was actually capable of handling Kurogane, even as a Lupine, stung. Not to mention it made him remember the way he had cowered in front of that smug bastard Touya after the Alpha had shifted. With a wordless grunt of acknowledgment, Kurogane knelt on the floor and began chaining himself up.

"Okay then." Remus's encouraging smile only made Kurogane's stomach churn unpleasantly. "Let's get started."

Kurogane shook his head to fight off the lingering headache, belatedly recognizing the behavior as dog-like. He sat up with an embarrassed grunt, only to find Remus giving him a look that was half-impressed and half-amused.

"What?"

"You're progressing at a very impressive rate," Remus nodded towards Kurogane's hands, both of which were still only partially transformed. "This is the stage that most Lupines reach after months of practicing, and yet you've accomplished that within a few weeks. Either you've already mastered your pain or..." The man trailed off at Kurogane's glare.

"Finish it," Kurogane growled, "I dare you."

The amused twinkle in Remus's eyes, so reminiscent of the mage, made Kurogane look away with another grunt. Had the idiot been there, he would have begun spouting stories about Kurogane secretly being a masochist, regaling Remus about all the times Kurogane had gotten injured. The bastard would have probably taken great pleasure in retelling the incident in Celes where Kurogane had lopped off his own arm. But then again, if Fai had been there, there would have been no need for Kurogane to be transforming.

With barely a thought, Kurogane forced his right hand to return to human form while keeping the left in its current state. He held the transformation for a moment before switching hands, transforming the right to wolf and left to human. The sound of cracking and shifting bones filled the air and he grit his teeth against the pain.
"Jokes aside," Remus said as he grew serious, keeping a close eye on Kurogane's transforming hands. "How bad is the pain when you're transitioning? I know you want to help your friend, but you're not going to be of any use to him if you push yourself too far."

"I can ignore it if I don't think about it." Kurogane grunted, flexing the fingers of his partially transformed hand.

"How exactly can you not think about it when you're doing that?" Remus indicated his partially transformed arm as Kurogane extended the transition up to his elbow. Remus sounded quite a lot like a swords master Kurogane had trained under after entering Tomoyo's service, his question carrying an air of interest rather than skepticism, which happened only when Kurogane had given a correct answer without explaining the logic behind it.

"If you've got a disciplined mind, you have an easier time focusing on what matters," Kurogane replied. "I've been training to do that ever since I first learned to handle a sword."

"That's an added benefit for you." Remus nodded. "It usually takes four to five months for a Lupine to learn to dismiss the pain while still keeping control of their transformation. How long have you been training in swordsmanship, Kuanos?"

"Over two decades. How long before I can get registered to this Gladiator thing?"

"From what I've been told, you're supposed to be a Lupine in training for more than half your life," Remus said. "Privately bred and trained for this purpose and recently bought by Ashura Veda for participation in the final event. I'd had my doubts earlier, but seeing the way you've been progressing, I'd say you should be able to clear the registration procedure in five days' time."

"I think there might be a problem with that plan." Nixon's voice drifted over from the doorway, making Kurogane glance at the Liberalist. The man carried an air of distractedness about him, his features pulled in a worried frown with dark circles ringing his eyes. His hands were flying through the air as he manipulated the holograms only he could see. Kurogane had thought the quick, seizure-like movements odd at first, but in the weeks that had gone by, he'd gotten used to it.

"What kind of problem?" Kurogane asked, shifting his transformed limbs into human. "Did Ashura lose his balls?"

"Oh man, I did not need that image in my head," Nixon groaned as he came over and set about unlocking the chains holding Kurogane in place. "He's still happy to sponsor you, so that's not an issue. Come on, Tommy is on a call with Ashura, and well… it'll be easier if you just come along. Thank you for your time, Remus."

"What's going on?" Remus asked, looking between the two of them with a furrowed brow.

"It's nothing big," Nixon said as he waved the Lupine away, beckoning Kurogane to follow him. "A couple of things got rescheduled, so we need Kuanos to join us in the conference call. Don't worry about it."

Kurogane nodded goodbye at Remus as he walked past, following Nixon into the streets, waiting until they had cleared the flea market before stopping. "All right, what's this about?" he asked, crossing his arms.

Nixon flicked his fingers, consulting the holographic screens visible only to him before speaking. "There's been a major information leak."

"What kind of information leak?" he demanded, his sensitive hearing immediately picking up the
quickening of Nixon's heartbeat, though to his credit, Nixon did not let anything show on his face.

"The kind that led The Company to reschedule their registration process from three days before the tournament opening to an entire week earlier," Nixon replied.

"You mean I have to register tomorrow?"

"I was hoping you weren't counting down the days," Nixon muttered under his breath, forgetting that Kurogane could hear him perfectly. Speaking louder, he continued. "Yes, and that's not all, but I'd much rather you're around Tommy when I tell you the rest. I might have survived your manhandling before but honestly, I'd very much like to keep my windpipe intact when you lose your shit."

Kurogane refused to admit that unpleasant churning in his gut was trepidation. Without another word, he walked with Nixon to the building that the Liberalists had claimed as their headquarters, gaining entry to the top level with Nixon. He'd only been here a few times. Usually Tomoyo came down if she needed to speak with him. This once, however, she was seated on the threadbare sofa, speaking with Ashura Veda in an urgent tone.

"—don't get how that could have been a possibility. There has to be a mistake."

"We can keep denying it for as long as you'd like, Miss Daidouji." Ashura's voice was smooth and controlled, barely letting any emotion through as he reclined in the sofa he occupied. "However, the truth of the matter is someone in your inner circle is not worthy of the trust you've placed in them."

"I can see that now." Tomoyo sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose as she rested her head in her free hand. "I'm just... never mind. Nixon mentioned that you had an alternate suggestion."

"Why don't we invite Mr. Kuanos inside and explain the situation first? He appears rather frustrated standing in the doorway." Ashura nodded over to where Kurogane stood, waiting for Tomoyo to notice his presence. He walked in, letting Nixon deal with sealing the door for privacy. Tomoyo patted the empty spot next to her, waiting until he had complied before speaking.

"The Company has rescheduled the registration dates," she said, pulling up displays filled with Cavahall's script that Kurogane still could not read – though that fact appeared to have escaped Tomoyo's mind. "And they've changed the parameters for the registration process. Nixon is trying his best to get everything done in time but... I don't think there's a chance of getting you into the finals."

Kurogane's heart sank momentarily before fury, spurred on by desperation, replaced all other emotions, and he felt the wolf within stir. "Why the hell not?"

"They're scanning specifically for presence of illegal nanites in all contestants," Nixon replied, staying well out of his reach. Kurogane clenched his fists, feeling the skin break under his nails. It healed an instant later. "They're covering it up with flowery bullshit about tightening security measures to ensure safety of the spectators during the final events. I've been working on building shielding for the nanites we were going to use on you."

"You won't get those ready in time?" The words came out as a growl, deep and rumbling in his chest.

"No, I'm done with those but..."

"Spit it out already!" he demanded, the embers of his agitation stoked to a slow burning rage by the
unnecessary delay.

"They're also using nanite disruptors to fry anything that gets past the scanners," Nixon answered hastily, his sightless gaze flitting to Tomoyo before settling back on Kurogane. "I could design shielding for a specific frequency in an hour or two tops, but I don't have enough time to design something for broad-spectrum disruptors, which is what they will be using to ensure maximum efficiency."

Kurogane closed his eyes and drew a deep breath, fighting down the impulse to hit something. It was irrational to feel such anger towards the people trying to help him but... Kurogane let go of the breath as he stood. Ignoring Nixon's flinch, he moved past the Liberalists towards the door. He had to get out before he did something they would all regret. Ashura's curious gaze followed his movements as Kurogane unlocked the door, but he ignored the man.

"Kuanos, wait," Tomoyo called after him as he shoved the door outwards and all but ran into the corridor. "Where are you going?"

"Out," he snapped without slowing his pace as he started down the stairs. He thought she said something else, but he couldn't hear much beyond the blood pounding in his ears as he marched down the stairs. No one dared to stop him, and the Liberalists at the main entrance hurried out of his way as he stormed out into the sludge-like rain. He felt his control over his emotions slipping. The wolf in his mind snarled to be let out and tear something apart. Kurogane's own bloodlust threatened to rise to the surface, his volatile thoughts rekindling emotions he'd buried deep down over the course of the journey. He longed to break something, or rather break someone. He wanted to hear the sound of flesh tearing, of bones breaking. He wanted blood to rain from the sky and screams to fill the air because maybe... maybe that would be enough to distract him from the crushing despair lurking just at the edges of his mind.

He broke out into a run, shoving bodies out of his way as he moved, uncaring of the indignant shouts that followed in his wake. He had to get away before he gave in and acted on his impulses.

I failed...

After everything, all that pain and uncertainty, all that helplessness, this... this had felt like a chance at retaking control of his fate. He had never realized how much he hated not being in control. Be it his body or his surroundings, he had always been able to ensure he could control the outcome. Enemies and obstacles fell before his superior skill and bullheaded determination. But now he was floundering in the dark, pulled under by a raging torrent that left him struggling to regain his bearings. Every time he thought he'd found an out, something went wrong, dragging him back into the abyss.

This had been his one chance to help the mage despite all the shit that had been thrown their way since their arrival. But the gods and whoever else was in charge of his life didn't think he'd had enough shit to deal with already. He'd given up everything to find a way to get to the mage and yet — his foot caught on a protrusion from the ground and he pitched forwards. Barely catching himself, Kurogane flipped back to his feet, only to fall when his right leg gave out beneath him. Feeling numb, he stared up stupidly at the pale sky, the color of a dirty blue rag, as the sun struggled to pierce the smog. He barely twitched as the broken bone in his leg realigned itself with a loud snap and began to heal. Trying to catch his breath, Kurogane pushed into a sitting position to take in his surroundings.

It took him a moment to realize that he was no longer in Cavahall. The ruins of a once magnificent settlement spread out all around him. The city with its gunmetal grey clouds was visible in the distance, beyond the crumbling ruins. His ears perked at the loud rumble approaching from the
east. Having heard the sound over the weeks he had spent in the city, Kurogane immediately recognized it as an automobile and jumped to his feet. Ignoring the twinge of pain as he put pressure on his still-healing leg, he hobbled off the road to crouch behind a partially demolished wall. His fall had jarred him out of his dark thoughts enough for him to recognize the stupidity of his actions.

If this was one of The Company vehicles on patrol beyond the city's borders, Kurogane was screwed. Being a Lupine came with the perk of accelerated healing, but there was no way he could counter the guns favored by The Company goons. If they'd managed to take down the mage with the insane amount of magic the man had at his fingertips on top of being a half vampire, Kurogane didn't stand much of a chance if there was a confrontation. It would be best to hide and bide his time until the patrol vehicle was out of range –he could already see the dust being kicked up in the distance –and then head back to the city.

A minute went by and the vehicle drove within Kurogane's line of sight. It was a pitiful thing, with rusting paint and a piece of thatched tarp for a roof. The windshield was cracked and smeared with streaks of dried sludge that made it impossible to see the driver, even with his superior vision. The vehicle rolled steadily across the uneven terrain, the loud rumble grating on his sensitive eardrums and he grit his teeth. The wolf snarled in his mind, viewing the vehicle and its owner as a threat and wishing to tear it apart, but Kurogane forced himself to stay hidden. It wasn't a patrol vehicle, and there was no reason to think the new arrival was there for him. In fact, if he stayed out of sight, the vehicle would pass him by with the driver none the wiser.

Plan of action decided, Kurogane dared not relax on the off chance he was mistaken. Half a minute later, he was glad for staying alert as the vehicle slowed to a halt a couple of feet from his hiding spot. The engine cut off. Kurogane tensed and crouched low to the ground, bringing his hands together to summon Ginryuu as the door opened. He tensed when the newcomer emerged from the vehicle. Narrowed, cat-slitted eyes observed their surroundings before settling on Kurogane's hiding spot.

Oh, for fuck's sake, another doppelgänger? Kurogane remained frozen in place, fighting the urge to tear the newcomer apart as the wolf snarled in agitation inside his head.

A pair of fangs peeked out from thin, bloodless lips as the newcomer smiled and shut the jeep's door. The vampire spoke, and his words carried a soft lilt, painfully reminiscent of the mage. "Kurogane-san fo Suwa, ou yera ton naysea namotd nif."

The sound carried clearly over to where Kurogane was hidden, but it only took him as long as his name was uttered to realize he had wandered out of the manjuu's translation range. Unable to understand what the vampire was going on about and knowing he shouldn't have been recognized in his Kuanos disguise, Kurogane summoned his sword. Scowl firmly in place, he stepped out from his hiding spot to take stock of the newcomer.

"Subaru, what the fuck are you doing here?" Kurogane demanded. The vampire's brows furrowed in confusion.

"Eth ch tiws awh gir. Eh seod won koh wima," Subaru muttered as he eyed the sword in Kurogane's hand before plastering a congenial smile. When he spoke next, it was in Japanese, even if the words carried the lilt of an exotic accent. "I have to admit. You are not an easy man to find, but I mean you no harm, Kurogane-san. I've come seeking your help."

"What for?" Kurogane asked, not letting down his guard. Only a novice would relax in front of a potential foe.
"I was told you could help me rescue my brother," Subaru replied, not put out by Kurogane’s hostile response.

"By whom?" Kurogane growled.

"Yuuko Ichihara."

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun! How’s that for a twist? There’s a traitor amongst the Liberalists and Kurogane seems to have met Subaru (who did make an appearance in an earlier chapter but he wasn’t mentioned by name at that time.) Anyway, did anyone see Yuuko coming? Anyone wanna guess if she’ll make an actual appearance later on? *hint hint wink wink* head over to the comment section to share your thoughts and to grab a bucket of virtual cookies on your way out :)
Eyes Unclouded

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Syaoran wandered the cobblestone streets, passing the occasional Scavenger as he headed towards the border fence. Since he'd discovered the comatose Lupine in Emeraude's secret basement, he'd felt compelled to claim the feathers. To distract himself from the impulse, Syaoran had taken to wandering the perimeter of the Compound at night after Meiling fell asleep. He'd settled into a routine, overseeing the work in the mines during the day and spending time with Meiling in the evenings as she helped him get reacquainted with the world. It was his attempt at trying to salvage their relationship, but Meiling never responded with more than watery smiles. At night, unable to sleep and filled with restless energy, he would wander the streets, trying to resist the call of the feathers he knew resided next to the comatose Lupine, then return to bed an hour before sunrise and sleep for a couple of hours, only to wake up and repeat the process all over again.

Each night, his wanderings took him closer and closer to the border posts. In the pale light of the moon, a waning gibbous, Syaoran made his way across the rocky terrain. He stopped near a transmission post, taking a deep breath before looking at the city spread out below him. Cavahall was a patchwork of bright lights and utter darkness, with wealthy sectors often lying alongside some of the poorest in the city. To Syaoran, it almost appeared as though the well-lit sectors were sucking the life from all of the parts of the city where the Unnaturals resided, feasting on the despair of the poor and the desperate. Beyond the patches of darkness were several moderately lit sectors where the Liberalists resided, and beyond that was an endless sea of dark, scraggly shapes in the wastelands.

Syaoran shivered, the air nipping at his sweat-dampened skin as he stood there, trying to resist the call of the feathers. Rubbing his bare arms, he wished he'd taken the time to grab his jacket before leaving the apartment he shared with Meiling. But he knew that he wouldn't have been able to resist the feathers if he'd stayed any longer. Even now, standing at the edge of the settlement, he could feel their magic, tugging impatiently as it tried to lure him back. Groaning in exasperation, Syaoran glanced back at the compound before stepping past the invisible boundary.

Maybe if he was halfway down the mountainside, he wouldn't be so tempted to take those feathers. Mind made up, Syaoran started down the winding path. He'd barely taken five steps when his body began to heat up, despite the cold air whipping about.

_Must be another hot flash._ Syaoran kept walking, dismissing it as something related to his mysterious illness. Three more steps and his ears began to ring. Syaoran paused, nausea bubbling up his throat. His blood felt like it was boiling, setting him ablaze from the inside. He glanced down at his trembling hands.

They had begun to glow.

His eyes went wide as he realized what was happening. With only a split second to react, Syaoran turned on his heel and flashed past the border marker. Once on the other side, he collapsed on the ground in a boneless heap, gasping for breath as his body began to cool. His shivering worsened, but he didn't dare move, his mind racing as a single thought rose to the forefront.

_I can't leave._

Stones dug into his back, the wind biting at his clammy skin. He clenched his eyes shut, trying to
ignore the feeling of his chest collapsing in on itself. Touya had promised Syaoran would be free to come and go from the Scavenger's compound as he wished. Why, then, had he failed to mention that there were active nanites in Syaoran's blood? Nanites that were set to blow him up if he strayed too far from the border markers. The betrayal hurt almost as much as his body did, but Syaoran grit his teeth, pushing the feeling away as he sat up, trying to think of a logical explanation for what had happened. Minutes went by, the call of the feathers a distant hum in the back of his mind before this more pressing concern.

Why did Touya have me injected with the nanites? Why wouldn't he tell me about it?

Clambering back to his feet, Syaoran headed back towards the settlement, his steps carrying him past Emeraude's clinic, towards the building Touya had claimed as his own. Despite the early hour, Syaoran wanted Touya to explain his actions. If he had to pound on the man's door until he woke, so be it.

Upon his arrival, Syaoran was surprised to discover that Touya was very much awake. The sound of his agitated voice drifted out from the open window. Listening, Syaoran managed to pick up on the slight crackle of static in the air, letting him know that Touya was on a call with someone. Syaoran considered coming back later, only to freeze when he finally made out what Touya was saying inside.

"— despite assurances from your end, she is still not here," Touya growled. "I'm beginning to have doubts about your promises to deliver."

"The situation has become complicated," replied a man, the crackle of static underscoring each word, "due to the latest additions to her team."

"Then get rid of the Hybrid. I don't care what it takes. If you don't deliver on what you promised, there will be consequences."

"Do you think you can get her out of this place without my help, oh Great Leader of the Wronged?" the man said after a beat, his tone thick with mockery. "Don't think threatening my position within The Company will do you any favors. I may have agreed to help you get what you want, Lupine King, but don't think your precious Lupa will survive the fallout if I were exposed. There have been some unforeseen delays, but I will deliver on what I promised. Whether you can keep up your end of the deal remains to be seen. I'll be in touch. Have a good day, Touya."

The line cut off with a decisive click.

I could come back later, Syaoran thought as he heard Touya's barely contained growls, but then he recalled the feeling of his blood burning as the nanites engaged, and any hesitation he'd had fled. No. This is too important to put off.

Taking a deep breath to steel his nerves, Syaoran headed towards the front door and rapped his knuckles against the steel. "Touya? It's me, Syaoran. We need to talk." With those words, he pushed on the door and stepped across the threshold. The Scavenger leader was reclining in a chair across from the doorway, a heavy, ornately carved wooden writing desk serving as a divider. The lights in the room were turned off, the only source of illumination a distorted holo-screen bearing the Comms Corp logo. The flickering light cast shadows across Touya's face.

"Syaoran." Touya bared his teeth as he gestured for Syaoran to take a seat. "To what do I owe this early morning visit?"

Syaoran decided to approach the issue with bluntness as he sat down. "When were you going to tell
Touya's grin, if it could even be called that, sharpened as he leaned forward. "Oh?"

"I couldn't sleep," Syaoran said, keeping the details to a minimum, "so I went out for a stroll. I thought a hike up and down the mountainside would help tire me out, but the moment I crossed the border markers…" He trailed off, watching Touya closely for his reaction.

"I see." Touya leaned back, steepling his fingers as he considered Syaoran.

"Well?" Syaoran demanded. "When were you going to tell me I was a prisoner here? You said I was free to come and go as I pleased."

"I meant what I said," Touya replied calmly. "You are free to come and go whenever you want. Would you like me to disable the nanites?"

"Why was I injected with nanites?" Syaoran asked, making note of Touya's evasion.

"For your own safety."

"How does getting blown up equate to 'my own safety'?" Syaoran growled, losing control over his feral half as his fangs elongated. His vision flickered between its normal acuity and the predatory sharpness brought on by his vampire half as he grit his teeth, digging his nails into his palms to keep himself from jumping at Touya.

"Bia's interest in you made me realize I'd made a mistake, bringing you along for that meeting," Touya said, for all appearances contrite as he ran a hand through his hair. "Even though I got her to back off, it's only a matter of time before she makes some underhanded attempt to get her hands on a priceless specimen such as yourself."

"And you figured it'd be better if I was blown up rather than out from under your control?"

"Do you think so little of me?" Touya asked after a heartbeat. Syaoran stayed silent, crossing his arms as he waited for Touya to answer his question. "The Company has a way to detect active nanites." Touya sighed, turning his gaze away to stare out the window. "I figured that if they somehow manage to sneak into the compound and get to you, they'd find the active nanites in your bloodstream and retreat. Any attempts to disable the nanites using external means sends an alert directly to me, so I'd know of the attempt before they could manage to smuggle you out."

"I see." Syaoran frowned, still dissatisfied. Despite his willingness to answer Syaoran's questions, he could tell there was something Touya was hiding from him.

"I meant what I said, kiddo," Touya repeated his earlier words. "If you ever want to leave the compound, regardless of the time of the day, all you have to do is ask. You are not a prisoner here. I only had them injected to keep you safe." "And when were you going to tell me all this?"

"I…” Touya trailed off, meeting Syaoran's eye with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry I didn't bring this up sooner, before you had to find out in such an unpleasant manner. But for what it's worth, I was only trying to protect someone I consider a part of my family. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

Syaoran mulled over the words. He hadn't missed the way Touya had avoided answering his question. Coupled with Meiling's behavior and a few discrepancies between what he'd been told
and what he'd observed so far, Syaoran knew there were things he was being lied to about.

"I want to speak with Kuanos."

-0-

Fai ducked under the punch Lupa threw his way, bringing up his hand to catch her arm. Using her own momentum against her, he threw her over his shoulder, hearing the satisfying smack as her back collided with the floor. Today was one of the rare days where his group had no televised matches scheduled, so Seishirou had handed Kamui and him over to Kyle for a joint training session with Lupa. Fai deflected Kamui's claws before punching at his torso, though Kamui easily dodged the attack.

Feinting to the right, Fai conjured a low-powered shield around himself, well-accustomed to the double-teaming tactics from his teammates. Lupa's kick collided with the shield, halting her instead of shattering like Fai had expected. He grinned; his nightly meditation sessions were finally paying off. The shield had been moderately complex, yet he'd been able to successfully conjure it in combat conditions. A month ago, it would have blown up in his face, taking him out of the fight long before Lupa or Kamui could have succeeded.

Lupa let out a frustrated snarl as she hopped back, crouching with predatory grace as she prepared to launch another attack. Her clawed fingers dug into the ground as she got ready to pounce, though she faltered at the last minute and pulled back.

Fai felt a flicker of concern at her sickly pallor as he took note of the sweat dotting her brow. Compared to their routine matches, they had only been fighting for a little while. He almost took a hesitant step in her direction, only to roll under a swipe aimed for his throat as Kamui took advantage of his momentary distraction. Fai blocked the next attack, retaliating with a low kick of his own to get his sire to back off.

He hastily conjured another shield to block Kamui's retaliation. Sending a wide-range banishing spell at Kamui that threw him across the room, he shot towards Lupa. Casting a blinding spell that dazed her long enough to cover a punch to the temple, Fai sent her stumbling from the blow. Lupa lost control over her transformation as she went sprawling on her back.

"All right, that's enough. Stand down," Kyle called out. Fai tightened his grasp on the next spell he had woven, allowing the magic to fizzle out while keeping an eye on Lupa all the while. She glowered at him, spitting a mouthful of bloody saliva to the side as she got back on her feet. "I said stand down, Strigoi."

Fai's attention was drawn toward Kamui, who had been getting ready to attack him again. At Kyle's second warning, however, he desisted, redirecting his venomous glower at Kyle.

"Lupa, report to the med-bay after dinner tonight," Kyle said as he turned away to leave. "You're all dismissed."

"Fuck..." Lupa hissed, having gone deathly pale as she hurried towards the exit. Kamui blocked her way. With a low growl, Lupa tried side-stepping him only to have Kamui move in front of her again. "Get out of the way."

Kamui narrowed his eyes. "No."

"Get the fuck out of my way, brat!" Lupa snarled, shoving him hard as she tried to move past him.

"I said no," Kamui replied, arm snaking out to catch her wrist as he yanked her away from the
door. "What the hell is going on with you?" Kamui's nostrils flared as he sniffed the air around her. He looked very much like a Lupine in that moment, though Fai doubted he would appreciate the comparison. Fai hung back, watching Lupa as she struggled to free her arm from Kamui's grasp.

*She could transform and wrench free in a moment,* Fai thought. *so why hasn't she?*

"Just as I thought," Kamui hissed, eyes flashing gold as he exposed his fangs. "What the hell were you thinking?" he yelled, grabbing hold of Lupa's shoulder to give her a strong shake.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Lupa snarled as she shoved him back, though Kamui barely budged. Fai didn't miss the way Lupa's eyes darted towards the camera installed in one of the corners of the room. "Just shut up and let go of me."

*Whatever this is, she's been hiding it from everyone,* Fai noted. Breathing rapidly as her eyes darted between the camera and Fai, Lupa's struggles grew more desperate.

"If you were so worried about them finding out," Kamui spat the word, digging his claws deep enough in her skin to draw blood, "why the hell did you choose now of all times to go breeder?"

*Breeder? As in—*

The sound of Lupa's slap rang throughout the room as she finally transformed, delivering a punch to Kamui's gut before twisting out of his grasp. "You don't know a fucking thing, you whiny, ignorant leech!"

*It can't be what I think it is…* Fai stood paralyzed, waves of hot and cold rushing down his back as he watched the confrontation play out before him.

"Oh, don't I?" Kamui mocked, even though he grasped his midsection in obvious discomfort. "His stench is all over you. You can barely control your transformations anymore, and those baggy shirts you're using are only going to hide the truth for so long."

*No...* Fai's breathing hitched, the air in the room suddenly too thick for him to draw a proper breath. Lupa's mysterious sickness, her increased hostility, Kyle's increased interest in her... it all suddenly made sense. *How could I have been so stupid?* Lupa's biting retort was nothing more than noise in the distance to him. *I played right into their hands. This is exactly what Akira and Naba wanted.*

"Because you and your lover couldn't keep it in your pants, you've jeopardized the only chance I had of getting out of this hellhole!"

*I'm going to be a father!*

"Oh, you think I wanted this?" Lupa snarled, her voice a touch hysterical as she advanced on Kamui. A part of Fai knew he should intervene before the situation worsened, but his limbs were still locked in place. *But if anyone in The Company finds out, that child will be turned into another experiment.* "You think I asked to get knocked up?"

"It certainly seems that way," Kamui retorted, unsheathing his claws as he took a cautious step back.

*Akira would want to cut it open or do something worse... like she did to Syaoran-kun.*

"I was drugged!" Lupa shrieked. "And once the drug was in his system, Stutterboy had no control either. Do you have any idea what it feels like, having your own body betray you?"
"I need a new plan. I can't leave Lupa behind when I escape..."

"So you two were drugged," Kamui scoffed as he glared sideways at Fai. "Every breeder is pumped full of the stuff. If you were so worried losing control, you should have stayed away. Do you think that handler is going to miss something as big as the fact that you're carrying a Hybrid's twins?"

"No," Fai gasped, limbs unlocking long enough for him to stumble back a few paces. Twins... Heart in his throat, Fai looked from Kamui to Lupa, hoping that one of them would deny it. No, no, no... not twins... twins bring misfortune... A primal fear raced up his spine, frigid and burning all at the same time as he collapsed to his knees. His vision filled with endless white as a tower of mummified corpses rose before him, and in his mind's eye, he watched his brother fall to his death, calling out his name, so loving, so trusting, and then there was redredfreshbloodonsnow, and oh, Kerkés, he needed air.

Magic stirred under his skin, raw and wild. The rising power clashed with the nanites in his blood, setting it ablaze at the same time as it warred with the Cerellium in the air, crackling violently, and the stench of ozone filled the room. The magic burst out of him in an uncontrolled surge, shorting out the electronic equipment in his vicinity as the shock wave threw Kamui and Lupa against the wall. Fai could hear screams in the distance, and it was only as the world was swallowed by black that he realized they were his.

Chapter End Notes

Touya is a lying liar who lies. Poor Syaoran is not as free as Touya had had him believe at first and the poor guy had to find out after nearly getting vaporized. Fai, on the other hand, is soon going to be Fai-Daddy to a pair of adorable twins! Poor guy, never seems to get a break, does he? I hope this revelation explains some of Lupa's erratic behaviour and what exactly happened between the two the night they slept together. I'd love to hear your thoughts so don't forget to comment and grab some more virtual cookies :)}
The jeep rolled over the uneven terrain in the dark, headlights turned off. With Subaru's superior vision, Kurogane doubted they needed the light. As it was, Kurogane was committing the path to memory with Lupine vision, one hand wrapped around Ginryuu's hilt in anticipation of unseen threats. His nose tickled at the dust kicked up by the vehicle, so it was a jarring change when the crisp scent of apples replaced the smell of dirt.

Startled, Kurogane sat up straighter as their surroundings morphed from the ruins of a decrepit city bathed in darkness to a sunny apple orchard. "What the…"

"Holographic technology," Subaru muttered, still looking straight ahead as Kurogane stared wide-eyed at his surroundings. Kurogane recognized the place. It had been over two decades since he had witnessed hordes of onii swarming across the land, burning everything in their path, but Kurogane recognized the gardens of his village. A group of women with baskets walked directly in the path of the jeep, though none of them appeared to have noticed the vehicle hurtling towards them. Subaru appeared unconcerned as he drove right through them, their images distorting momentarily, like smoky wisps, as they walked on, chattering amongst each other. "The Company has recently started using this area for their field experiments in holographic technology. I suspect we will see it being used during the final events of the GP."

"How the hell would they know what Nihon looked like? What my home looked like? A cold lump of unease settled deep in his gut as the jeep raced through the hologram. Kurogane had a feeling it was something much worse. An unnatural stillness permeated the air, like a static charge raising the hair all over his body. Kurogane had only ever felt something like this once before, on the day he'd finally avenged his parents' deaths. Kurogane frowned to himself, making note of the similarity just as the sensation began to weaken.

As soon as it had appeared, the mirage fell away, once again leaving behind decrepit ruins. Subaru expertly maneuvered the jeep through the terrain, belying his familiarity with the path he was taking. In the distance, he could see a structure rising out of the ground, like a maw of a hungry wolf. Smaller rocks stuck out at sharp angles underneath, which should have been reason enough to slow down, although Subaru appeared to be speeding up, expertly steering around the protrusions until he reached the side of the boulder. Hopping out of the jeep, he moved to fiddle with something in the rock's face before climbing back in and driving right through the flickering surface. Parking just beyond the opening they had driven through, Subaru climbed out once again, motioning for Kurogane to do the same.

The inside of the rock appeared to be much bigger than the outside, with the ground dug up to make room for at least three jeeps parked side by side, though only Subaru's vehicle was currently parked in the cavern. A tunnel went deeper into the ground, a faint glow lighting the way. Kurogane could see the projectors that transmitted the illusion of a solid rock face he'd seen from the outside. Unless someone knew exactly where to look, Kurogane was certain no one would know that there was something more to the structure than a strangely shaped boulder.

Subaru grabbed a pair of guns from a rack near the tunnel and handed one to Kurogane. "Swords are good in close combat, but a gun is better suited for where we're heading," he said as he strapped
the second gun around his waist. "I trust you know how to use it?"

Kurogane sealed Ginryuu in his arm and brought up the new weapon to check if the design was similar to the ones he’d acquainted himself with during his travels. A flick of a finger against a hidden latch to disable the safety was all the confirmation he needed. His lips peeled apart in a savage grin. "Point and shoot."

"Point and shoot," Subaru agreed. "We only have a limited number of bullets, however, so make each shot count. If we run out before making it to safety, things might get unpleasant."

Kurogane bristled at the implication that he might miss but decided not to prove his aim by using the vampire as target practice. The brat had no idea who he was talking to. Kurogane frowned, holding the vampire's gaze until Subaru cleared his throat and gestured towards the narrow opening in the wall behind him. "We go through here."

Kurogane ducked through the hole right after the vampire, senses on alert as they moved through the roughly hewn tunnel. It seemed to wind like a coiled snake. After walking for nearly fifteen minutes, the tunnel crossed with another, this one far broader and much more artificial in nature. Water dripped down from pipes running along the roof of the tunnel while a shallow stream of foul-smelling liquid wound across the bottom. Subaru jumped into the water with a loud splash before heading down the sloping passageway. The new tunnel was just as twisted as the one before, although this one branched off in several, seemingly random directions, creating an elaborate labyrinth.

"Stay alert," Subaru whispered, moving through the rising water with a predatory grace, catlike eyes scanning their surroundings. "These tunnels are infested with chimeras."

"Chimeras?" Kurogane questioned, the foreign word twisting on his tongue.

"Chimeras are abominations. The Company uses genetic splicing on Unnaturals and predatory animals to create experimental hybrids," Subaru replied, his voice grim. "The creatures are bred and conditioned for increased aggression and used in the final event. The failed experiments are released in the tunnel systems running under Cavahall so that Unnaturals can't use them as a means of escape."

"We're under the city?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Subaru replied.

They moved through the labyrinth in silence for the rest of their journey. Heeding Subaru's words, Kurogane kept his spiritual sense focused on their surroundings, though it was nearly an hour before he felt something flickering at the edge of his perception. Kurogane slowed, adjusting his grip on the gun as the entity flickered at the edges of his awareness once again, nearly a quarter mile in the other direction. It only lasted for second before the thing vanished once more, reappearing somewhere behind them.

"Those chimera things, how fast can they move?"

"Depends on what kind of Unnatural DNA was used in its creation," Subaru replied as he slowed to match Kurogane's pace. "Why?"

Kurogane frowned when the chimera vanished once again, his fingers itching for Ginryuu's familiar hilt in place of the gun he held as the chimera reappeared ahead on the other side of the twisting tunnel. "There's one stalking us."
Alarm flashed across Subaru's face as a low-pitched chittering filled the air. Time slowed as the chimera vanished again, this time appearing four feet above them. A barbed tail sliced through the air, aiming for the vampire's head. Kurogane shoved Subaru out of the way, bringing up the gun to fend off the claws slashing at his own neck. The makeshift shield held off most of the attack as the creature's sharp claws cut through the gun's barrel like butter, but one of the claws still managed to scratch his shoulder. Kurogane hissed at the rapidly spreading burn as he discarded the destroyed weapon. He dodged the tail-whip, his left arm falling limply by his side. The paralytic spread through his blood, eating its way through his strength. Cursing internally, Kurogane focused on dodging around the chimera. His body was growing sluggish, affecting his reactions.

He remembered Remus telling him that Lupine blood was good at countering most poisons on its own if given enough time. But the rate at which the chimera's poison was spreading, one more nick would be fatal. Kurogane avoided a claw by mere inches when the vampire brat finally had the sense to shoot at the chimera. About damn time! Kurogane wanted to snarl as he staggered back. The creature screeched as the bullets hit their mark. It tried to dodge the next bullet, only to collide with the wall of the narrow tunnel. The first bullet burrowed in its flesh and the creature gave another shriek but the second ricocheted off the stone when the creature vanished. Kurogane took that as an opportunity to summon Ginryuu, but the mage's spell embedded in his flesh failed to respond. Fuck!

The chimera reappeared directly behind Kurogane, hitting him like a speeding bull. He tried to roll with the fall but the chimera's barbed tail wrapped around his legs, sending him crashing into the putrid water. It landed on his back, knocking the breath out of him as its claws tore through his flesh. Kurogane bucked in an attempt to throw the thing off, but the more he struggled, the faster the poison spread. He could feel the strength already leaving his body. The chimera's tail pierced straight through his leg and Kurogane instinctively inhaled. His fuzzy mind realized the mistake a moment too late as the rancid water filled his mouth. He sputtered, limbs twitching uselessly as his lungs constricted. A loud thunderclap echoed through the tunnels before the chimera's shrieks replaced it. Another thunderclap sounded as the chimera continued shredding Kurogane's back. A horrible pressure built up in his chest.

Air. He needed air.

Kurogane could hold his breath for long periods of time, but with so little control over his body, he couldn't stop himself from inhaling. Water filled his lungs, burning and freezing at the same time. His ears rang. In the distance, several more thunderclaps echoed, but darkness had already swallowed him.

Something hit his chest. Kurogane sprang up, vomiting a mouthful of water as he was pushed on his side. He coughed, squinting his eyes open to find a fleshy blob hovering next to him. Coughing, he struggled to sit up as the cold hands came to rest on his shoulder, offering support as he tried to breathe. The world spun. His limbs felt like they were filled with molten lead. Every breath was like barbed wire scraping along his insides. Nausea bubbled up his throat and he lurched forwards, throwing up more water and bile. Gasping for breath, he became aware of the shudders wracking his body, as a cold-hot sensation ran along his skin, one Kurogane recognized as blood loss. He couldn't feel his legs. Or his arms.

It felt like eternity before Kurogane could properly breathe again, the burning in his lungs and back slowly lessening. The chunks of flesh missing from his back sluggishly regenerated. Subaru helped him lean against the wall as he moved away. Now that the world was coming back in focus, Kurogane could make out an unmoving mass almost as high as he was lying a little ways away.

"Fuck..." Kurogane rasped, the word slurring on his tongue as anger and embarrassment flooded
his veins. Now that he had a moment to reflect on what had transpired. Death by drowning in sewage. The mage will never let me forget.

"—very lucky," Subaru was speaking. "The chimera was part deathstalker. It is a good thing the stinger went fully through your leg, or I might not have been able to save you. Fast-acting poison like that can bring down even a Lupine."

Kurogane switched to Lupine vision, groaning in pain as his retinas burned.

"Don't," Subaru warned belatedly as Kurogane closed his eyes in an attempt to get rid of the throbbing in his head. "You might not have died from the poison, but it's still in your blood. You mustn't transform yet."

"Could have mentioned that first," Kurogane growled.

"My apologies."

Kurogane still couldn't feel anything below the knees, but sparks of pain shot up his thighs every time Subaru pried a piece of the barbed tail free from his flesh. "Thank you," Subaru murmured after a while, steadily working to free him. "You saved my life, at the cost of nearly losing your own."

"You saved mine. We're even."

An uneasy silence settled between them, broken only by the sound of Kurogane's grunts each time a barb was torn free. Kurogane thought back on the fight, growling at his own stupidity. A moment of distraction was all it had taken. He would have been dead had Subaru not been there. How the hell did he, a seasoned warrior, make such a stupid mistake? How the hell was he supposed to save the kid and the mage if he kept getting himself mangled every time he went out on his own?

Not even half a day since he'd left the Liberalists and he got himself nearly torn to pieces by an experimental mutt. So what if it was nearly twice his size? Kurogane had taken on onii six times as big back in Nihon and still come out of the fight with nothing more than a bruise or two.

"There was nothing you could have done to fight if off," Subaru said. "The poison is a paralytic, designed to counter accelerated healing. The chimera's tail and claws are coated in it. By serving as the distraction, no matter how unintentional it may have been, you gave me the chance to kill it and save us both." Kurogane opened his eyes to glare at the young vampire, who had nearly finished untangling the barbed tail. "I'll get the antidote before I pull out the stinger. Less chance of you bleeding out that way."

Subaru patted him on the shoulder before getting to his feet, his nails elongating as he approached the dead chimera. Before Kurogane could demand an explanation for what he was doing, Subaru sank his claws into the corpse and began tearing it open.

"The hell?"

"An example of The Company's sense of humor," Subaru said, his words punctuated with the sound of rending flesh. "The antidote shots are stored in a specialized compartment in the chimera's chest cavity. And the only way to get to those is if you kill it first. If someone is unfortunate to come across one during the final events in GP, there's a ninety percent chance they'll die a horrific death. Only bullets can take one down, so unless they hand you a gun going into the match..." Subaru gave a humorless laugh. "They did that with Lupa's group during her first year, you know. Gave the group three guns and left all the bullets inside a chimera compartment. You
can imagine how that encounter might have gone." Subaru reappeared, carrying a box no larger than his hand. Crouching down next to Kurogane, he broke it open and withdrew four cylinders no thicker than his fingers. "This might hurt a little."

Kurogane sucked in a sharp breath as the vampire jabbed two shots into his injured leg. The poison had been like fire, turning his insides to ash. The antidote, on the hand, was like ice flooding into his veins. Kurogane shivered as his fingers went numb. Subaru emptied the remaining two shots in his jugular before tearing off a strip of cloth from the edge of his threadbare coat, using it as a tourniquet for Kurogane's injured leg. In one sharp move, the stinger was out and his vision went white.

"Fuck!" The ice in his veins made it harder for him to hold back the snarl. The trembling worsened to a point where Kurogane could see his own breath misting before his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Subaru said, sounding genuinely apologetic as he threw the empty container away and retrieved the mangled remains of Kurogane's gun from the ground next to him. Subaru pocketed the bullets he'd retrieved from the damaged magazine before speaking. "I wish I could let you rest here until you've recovered, but it would be for the best if we moved now." He stood, helping Kurogane get back to his feet before slinging his arm over his own narrow shoulders.

Fifteen minutes later, sensation returned to Kurogane's limbs like a swarm of furious ants. Biting back curses with each step, Kurogane tried to keep up with Subaru. An eternity seemed to pass before Subaru stopped before a massive metal wall. By then the hole in his leg was mostly filled out and the skin on his back had almost finished mending. It still pulled uncomfortably when he moved his arms, but at least the bleeding had stopped. Kurogane watched Subaru fiddle with a small box embedded in the metal wall. It gave a tiny beep as green light outlined the entire wall, and it heaved with a tired groan. The sound reverberated deep in his bones and Kurogane grit his teeth as a small opening appeared near the edge of the wall.

"It's narrow, but it's safer to squeeze through this than allow a chimera to follow us inside," Subaru said as he helped Kurogane pass through. The other side of the wall wasn't much better than the tunnels they'd taken to get there, what with the stench of moss and decay that tickled at Kurogane's sensitive nose and the steady drip drip of water falling from somewhere nearby. Dull lights flickered to life as the metal wall closed with another bone-jarring thud, and Kurogane blinked rapidly as his watered at the sudden brightness. Now that he was able to see, he noticed several differences to the tunnels outside. For one, there appeared to be a lower level to the area, like a roofless basement or a pit sunken into the floor. A rusting metal railing securing the upper area, leading to a set of metal grate stairs spiraling downwards. Beyond that was an amalgam of overlapping balconies and catwalks, surrounded by an eclectic collection of old machinery and delicate equipment; the latter appeared relatively new. The walls and parts of the machinery were covered by scorch marks. A few of them appeared to be human silhouettes, as though someone had painted the walls with shadows and then removed the cutouts.

"What is this place?"

"A decade ago, this was a secret lab involved in cutting edge research for The Company," Subaru replied as he descended the staircase, motioning for Kurogane to follow. "After a fire killed the staff and allowed the experiments to escape, it was abandoned. Kamui and I came across the blueprints, and after some scouting and cleaning up, we claimed it as our own."

"Won't those bastards know you're using it?" Kurogane asked, looking around as Subaru led him to one of the balconies via the crisscrossing catwalks. An iron-framed bed was pushed up against the wall, the faded yellow paint mostly peeled off the rusting metal, and Kurogane even spotted a
couple of springs poking out from the mattress on top. Next to the bed was a scorched metal cabinet with a human shadow outline going up its left side. Kurogane sat down at the edge of the bed as Subaru opened the cabinet and began rummaging inside.

"A friend helped with the security," Subaru said as pulled out several bottles labeled in Cavahall's gibberish, setting them out neatly on top of the cabinet. "He removed all records of this lab from The Company's databases and reported a cave-in in the tunnel systems leading to this point. The Company has no idea it exists. Now," Subaru turned around to face Kurogane with a small smile, "let's get you properly healed up. We have a lot of planning to do."

Chapter End Notes

Subaru seems to think that the mirage they encountered was a result of tech being tested by The Company but to quote Kurogane, how would The Company know what Suwa looked like before it was destroyed back when Kuro was a kid? What do you guys think might be happening? I'd love to hear your theories so leave me a comment and grab a complementary virtual cookie :)


Breakdown

Mokona shifted in its hiding spot under the couch, watching Yuui- in his guise of Ashura- engage in a video call with Cavahall’s Tomoyo. Mokona was careful not to make a sound, because Yuui believed it to be asleep in its room and Mokona did not want to be sent back without discovering what Yuui was so intent on hiding from it.

"—don't get how that could have been a possibility," Tomoyo was saying. "There has to be a mistake."

Mokona crawled along the edge of the couch until it could peer out from under the gap to look at Tomoyo. It only took the dimension hopper a glance to realize how different she appeared from the versions of her that it had met in its travels so far. She was older, with bruise-like circles ringing her hollow eyes that lacked their mischievous sparkle. In place of Kurogane’s princess was a jaded caricature, and Mokona felt its heart crumple at the sight.

"We can keep denying it for as long as you'd like, Miss Daidouji." Yuui replied smoothly, shifting his legs so that they blocked Mokona's line of sight. Biting back a whimper as it put pressure on its slowly healing arm, Mokona crept along the edge of the sofa until it once again had a clear view of the hologram floating above the coffee table. "However, the truth of the matter is someone in your inner circle is not worthy of the trust you've placed in them."

"I can see that now. I'm just… never mind." Tomoyo sighed. A tall man appeared in the doorway behind her, curly black hair brushing his well-defined cheekbones. Something about him struck Mokona as familiar, though Mokona was certain they had never met. "Nixon mentioned that you had an alternate suggestion."

"Why don't we invite Mr. Kuanos inside and explain the situation? He appears rather frustrated standing in the doorway."

Mokona watched curiously as the man marched into the room. Kuanos's gait was confident, carrying a hint of predatory grace that once again struck as familiar to the dimension hopper. He came to sit next to Tomoyo, scowling at the screen, amber eyes narrowed in impatience.

"The Company has rescheduled the registration dates," Tomoyo said, pointing at something that wasn't captured by the holographic transmission just as another man came to stand behind her. Mokona paid the newcomer a cursory glance, noting his vacant grey eyes and the odd metallic protrusions at his temples before its attention was once again drawn to Kuanos. Even the way he sat looked familiar. "And they've changed the parameters for the registration process. Nixon is trying his best to get everything done in time, but I don't think there's a chance of getting you into the finals."

"Why the hell not?" Kuanos demanded, narrowing his eyes.

"That voice… It can’t be…"

Yuui shifted with a pained grunt, drawing Mokona’s attention, though Mokona didn’t think anyone else had heard him. The dimension hopper recalled how sickly Yuui had looked when he had emerged from his room after the transformation. The duration of the after-effects had been growing longer with every change, Mokona had noticed. For a moment, Mokona was torn over what to do but then Yuui shifted some more, clearly struggling to hide his discomfort and Mokona nearly crawled out from under the sofa. It caught itself at the last moment. Yuui didn't know that Mokona
was eavesdropping on the conversation, after all.

"They're scanning specifically for presence of illegal nanites in all contestants," the other man said and Mokona turned its attention back to Kuanos, studying the way he had clenched his jaw. "They're covering it up with flowery bullshit about tightening security measures to ensure safety of the spectators during the final events. I've been working on building shielding for the nanites we were going to use on you."

"You won't get those ready in time?" Kuanos growled.

"No, I'm done with those but…"

"Spit it out already!"

Mokona gasped softly as recognition flared, eyes wide in disbelief. Is that Kurogane?

"They're also using nanite disruptors to fry anything that gets past the scanners," the first man replied. "I could design shielding for a specific frequency in an hour or two tops, but I don't have enough time to design something for broad-spectrum disruptors, which is what they'll be using to ensure maximum efficiency."

Kuanos stood up, and the other man flinched as though expecting a blow. Kuanos ignored him and stomped towards the door.

"Kuanos, wait! Where are you going?" Tomoyo called after him as the man disappeared from view.

"Out."

"Kuanos!" Tomoyo cried as she hurried out after him, "Kua— Kurogane wait!"

Mokona inhaled sharply as Tomoyo unknowingly confirmed its suspicions. It was Kurogane!

But why does Kurogane not look like himself? Was he cursed?

"Oh dear," Yuui said, his voice strained as he addressed the unnamed man. "It looks like your friend is quite displeased about the change in the rules. My offer to help still stands if you can convince Mr. … Kurogane to cooperate. Until then, there's nothing I can do for you, Mr. Nixon. Have a pleasant day." And with that, Yuui disconnected the call.

Mokona sneaked back under the couch. It knew it had to speak with Yuui and convince him to take Mokona to meet with Kurogane, but something held it back. While Yuui had claimed that he had no idea where Mokona's friends were, he wasn't surprised about Kuanos being Kurogane. In fact, judging from his conversation, Mokona suspected Yuui might have met Kurogane before. So then… why had Yuui lied?

The indifference wasn't an act, unlike Fai, because Mokona hadn't felt even a hint of surprise from Yuui when Tomoyo had used Kurogane's real name. Yuui had already known who he was. But why did Yuui lie to Mokona? Why did Yuui take Mokona all around the city when Yuui could take Mokona straight to Kurogane?

Thinking back on it, Mokona could recall several instances of when Yuui had insisted that Mokona remain behind at the flat or stay hidden in the storage of Yuui's shop. Could it be that Yuui never had an intention of taking Mokona to its friends? So if Yuui found out that Mokona had eavesdropped on this conversation, would he be upset that Mokona hadn't obeyed his instructions?
Would he try something other than lying to keep Mokona from getting back to the others? Yuui wasn't as nice as Fai but... he was still Fai's brother, wasn't he?

Yuui gave a pained grunt as he stood, cutting off Mokona's line of thought as the sound of struggled breathing reached its ears. Mokona inched back to the edge and peered up. Yuui's skin had turned a sickly pallor, beads of sweat dotting his brow as he swayed on his feet. He staggered a couple of steps towards his bedroom before stumbling into the side of the coffee table. Unbalanced, Yuui fell with a weak cry, hitting his head on the table on his way down.

"Yuui?" Mokona whimpered as it crawled into the open. Yuui lay unmoving on the carpeted floor, his back to the sofa. The dimension hopper made its way across the floor to reach the fallen man. "Yuui?" Mokona repeated, patting the man's dark hair, its paw coming away wet with crimson as it reached Yuui's face. "Oh no, Yuui! Wake up!"

Mokona could feel the heat radiating from his skin as it patted Yuui's face, unsuccessfully trying to wake him up. Blood from the injury in his head had begun to trickle down to the floor, staining the carpet red. *Yuui needs help...*

Mokona closed its eyes, searching for the thread of magic that connected it to the Mokona in Yuuko— no, Watanuki's shop. It existed in a pocket floating freely in the turbulent sea of inter-dimensional space, threaded through the mini-dimension like a robust golden thread strung through a glass bead, a representation of Mokona's connection to its home and the space it used to traverse dimensions. But now as Mokona looked at it, the rope had morphed into something entirely different. Where there had been just one sturdy rope was now a mess of knots with frayed edges breaking off into three separate, weaker ropes, one glowing a pale blue, another a muted silver and the third a soft orange. The silver rope was barely tangible, slipping through Mokona's grasp when the dimension hopper reached for it.

Mokona sobbed, fear clenching its icy claws around its body as it struggled to make sense of the mutated connection. The invisible walls of the pocket space bore an alarming amount of cracks, visible as inky lines hanging in air. The walls groaned under the pressure of the raging inter-dimensional sea and even as Mokona watched, a new crack appeared. Scared, Mokona retreated to the physical world, hoping it wouldn't have to return there. It looked around in hopes of finding something to stem the flow of blood and try and wake Yuui up, long enough for him to call someone else for help.

"Yuui, wake up," Mokona whispered, tears gathering at the edge of its eyes. "Yuui, please. You promised to take Mokona back to Mokona's friends. Wake up."

Yuui's eyes snapped open, brown eyes staring right through Mokona. The silence stretched out between them, broken only by Mokona's hesitant whisper. "Y-Yuui?"

Yuui remained unresponsive for a fraction of a heartbeat before his whole body jerked to the side and he began to scream.

"Yuui!" Mokona cried out as one of the man's flailing arms sent it flying into the sofa. Mokona whimpered, this time from pain, and scuttled back to the edge of the cushions, peering down at the convulsing man. Closing its eyes, Mokona dove into the pocket space, surveying the mutated connection it held to its home dimension. Reaching out, it once again tried to grasp hold of the silver rope, feeling a tinge of relief when the magic formed a somewhat tangible connection with the black Mokona at its other end. The dimension hopper felt the gem on its forehead heat up as the link stabilized and a projection appeared in the air in the real world.

Mokona opened its eyes and gasped at the face that appeared inside the magical hologram. It had
been four years since Mokona had last seen her, just before she had embraced her death. And yet, Yuuko Ichihara stood at the other end of the connection, healthy and very much alive. Yuuko’s crimson eyes widened by a fraction to mirror the dimension hopper’s surprise. Her gaze lingered momentarily on the bandaged stub of Mokona’s arm as Mokona whispered a hesitant question. "Y-Yuuko?"

"Mokona." Yuuko smiled, glancing at its surroundings with a critical eye. "This is a surprise. How long ago did you leave Hanshin?"

"Mokona hasn’t been to Hanshin for three years."

"Oh, I see." The smile slid off Yuuko's face, her expression growing somber as she eyes Mokona's bandaged arm. "You latched on to the wrong connection."

"Y-Yuuko… How is Yuuko alive?"

"Alive?" Yuuko repeated momentarily surprised before her expression grew content. "The children succeeded, then? It appears as if the trials are not yet finished, however."

Yuui screamed and Mokona recalled its original reason for making the call. "Mokona needs help, Yuuko. Yuui is dying and Mokona doesn't know what to do."

"Who?" Yuuko asked sharply as Yuui's convulsions grew worse.

"Yuui is Fai's twin who lived in Cavahall in Fai's place," Mokona replied, watching Yuui’s skin ripple as though hundreds of worms were crawling just beneath the surface. "Yuuko, Yuui is dying. Please, help."

A myriad of emotions flickered across Yuuko’s face, though guilt and sadness were the ones Mokona could pick out with the most ease. None of it, however, was audible in her tone when she spoke. "You will need to make a wish, Mokona. I can help, but the price is something you will need to pay along with your new friend. Does Yuui wish to live?"

"Yes!" Mokona cried. "Yuui promised to help Mokona find Mokona's friends."

"Very well." Yuuko nodded as she gave a tiny vial of crimson to the other Mokona. Moments later, Mokona felt it arrive within the pocket space from which it retrieved the vial. "Make sure your friend drinks every last drop of that potion. Once he is awake and able to speak, we can discuss the price of your collective wish."

Nodding, Mokona cut off the connection and hurried to Yuui's side, hoping it wasn't too late to save the man's life. Unstopping the vial, Mokona brought it to Yuui's lips, forcing it down the man's throat with some effort before the dimension hopper backed away.

Yuui's screams died down to pained whimpers, his convulsions lessening to tremors as the worms under his skin disappeared. His breathing was still labored, but as the minutes ticked by, it began to even out. The black of his hair lightened to a sunny gold and Mokona watched, transfixed as slowly, Ashura's face melded into that of Yuui's until there was only Yuui left behind. Half an hour after the last of the changes had finished, Yuui’s eyes snapped open and Mokona hopped over to the man with a delighted cry, "Yuui!"

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"Yuui!" he heard a high-pitched cry before a white blob bounced into his line of sight.
Throat raw and head throbbing, Yuui tried to get his bearings. His insides were on fire, thanks to the malfunctioning nanites in his bloodstream creating spikes of agony every time one self-destructed. He could vaguely recall the warning that they had not been meant for long term usage, though he couldn't recall who had told him that tidbit of information. Had it been their developer who had hired Yuui to track them down before his death? Or the thief that Yuui had acquired them from? Or had it been— the thought slipped from his grasp as a wave of heat washed over him, involuntarily forcing his muscles to contract.

Knowing he didn't have much time left, Yuui ignored the whimpering Unnatural by his side and focused inwards. He followed the rising energy levels of the nanites, trying to convert the heat into potential energy to be used at a later point but was only partially successful. He bit back a cry as the pain grew enough to disrupt his focus, but before the released energy could boil him from inside, a burst of ice flooded his veins. It froze the nanites as it spread, taking with it the agony of being cooked alive. The sudden lack of heat left him reeling. Throat parched and limbs trembling from the cold, he tried to figure out the origin of this negative energy past the disorientation clouding his mind. It snaked along his insides, spreading out in thin, writhing tendrils that he managed to trace back to the icy orb inside his stomach.

Returning to his physical body, Yuui realized just how much it still hurt, even though the miraculous negative energy had shut down the transformative nanites without killing him. He was quite certain he wouldn't have been able to convert enough of the energy to prevent himself from becoming a mess of partially cooked and bleeding goo. It was a sobering thought.

However, as grateful as he was for the alien orb for keeping him alive, he still needed to figure out just what the hell it was that was resting in his stomach. Opening his eyes, Yuui gingerly pushed himself up on his elbows and looked at the tiny Unnatural. His tongue felt heavy, like sandstone scraping inside his mouth when he tried to speak. After several failed attempts, he only managed a hoarse question. "How?"

The world swayed lazily and he so badly wanted to lay down once again though he settled for heavily leaning against the coffee table instead. The throbbing in his head slowly lessened until it was reduced to a pulsing point in the back of his brain. His vision remained fuzzy around the edges, even though it was long past the time it was supposed to have returned to normal. The fuzziness only ever lasted so long as the transformation nanites were— oh... They had still been active when they'd gone haywire. Which meant that until he could get his hands on something to fix his eyes, Yuui would have to deal with the blurry vision. More distracting than that, however, was the low pitched whine that filled the air.

He reached out with a shaking hand to pat the creature on its head. "Hold on one moment, little friend."

Mokona stopped talking and Yuui cocked his head, trying to figure out where the noise was coming from and unable to come to a conclusion.

"Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Mokona's ears perked up, swiveling around its head as it appeared to concentrate on listening.

"You can't hear the buzzing?" Yuui frowned, glancing around the room before looking down at his trembling hands.

"Mokona can't hear anything."
"But…” Yuui broke off, focusing on the indistinct outlines of his fingers for a moment before bringing both hands to press against his ears. The distant noise of falling rain cut off, but the buzzing persisted. Yuui pressed hard enough for it to hurt and yet the sound remained. "I see."

"What's wrong, Yuui?" Mokona asked, scrunching up its face in worry as it took a step towards him.

"It's just in my head," Yuui said, giving it a crooked smile. The enormity of what had almost happened was setting in, and anxiety draped across his shoulders like a heavy cloak. The fuzzy vision and ringing in his ears didn't help matters much and Yuui felt his heartbeat quicken. He managed to push through his rising panic by focusing instead on the worried Unnatural hovering nearby. "Now then, what was it that you were trying to say, little friend?"

"Mokona was so scared when Yuui collapsed," the creature said, its ears drooping as it waddled up to Yuui and climbed up his leg. "Mokona didn't know what to do so Mokona tried to call Watanuki for help, but somehow connected to Yuuko instead. Yuui was dying so Mokona made a wish to save his life and now Yuuko wants to talk to Yuui."

"Me? Whatever for?"

"Yuuko gave Mokona potion that saved Yuui's life but we both have to pay for the wish," Mokona said.

"I would be honored to speak with the owner of the wishing shop.” Yuui allowed his lips to form a smile, even though a surge of fear that had nothing to do with his near death experience rose up in his chest. He hadn't been able to determine a method behind the prices the Witch of Dimensions extracted for the wishes she fulfilled, from what Mokona had told him. He had no way of knowing what sort of payment that woman might expect of him for saving his life. What if it was something he wasn't able to pay? Would she reverse whatever magic she had used to save his life? No, if something like that comes up, I'll convince her to take something else.

A beam of light shot from the jewel on Mokona's head, forming the hologram of a woman's face. The hologram hovered in the air, stable even though Mokona shifted around to settle against Yuui's stomach. The woman had long hair, as dark as tar, pulled back into an elaborate hairdo. Together with her crimson eyes, pale skin and lips as red as blood, Yuui could tell even from across dimensions that she wasn't an ordinary witch.

"Yuui-kun, I'm glad to see you have survived."

"Thank you for saving my life, Lady Yuuko," Yuui said, inclining his head slightly as he said. He needed to establish a good rapport with the witch if he was to convince her of changing the price later on. It might not come to it in the end, but if this price was something he couldn't pay, gaining a soft spot in her heart wouldn’t hurt his chances any.

"You should thank Mokona for that," the witch replied, a knowing glint in her eyes that let Yuui know she could see through his attempt to curry favor. "It was Mokona who made the wish on both of your behalf."

"Yuui saved Mokona's life too," Mokona announced before Yuui could oblige.

"It was no trouble at all, really." Yuui smiled, adopting an unassuming expression.

"Thank you for saving Mokona all the same," Yuuko said, appearing amused as she brought an elaborate pipe to her lips. Taking a drag once, she moved it away before continuing, "Now, as
Mokona has no doubt informed you already, there is a matter of price to be discussed for the wish made." The smoke curled around her lips with every word she spoke, swirling through the air inside the hologram in lazy swirls. "You reside in Cavahall, is that correct?"

"Yes?"

"There is a powerful magical artifact in your world," she said. "It is ancient, forged by the spell-crafters of ancient Nihon. I would like for you to acquire it for me. This artifact, though it appears to be a ball made of mud roughly the size of your fist, is capable of destroying the strongest of wards and illusions."

"That sounds like the thing Fai wished for in Koryo!" Mokona exclaimed. "The one Syaoran used to destroy the Ryanban's—"

"You mustn't speak of the future with me, Mokona," Yuuko admonished the creature gently, though the sly smile she wore let Yuui know that she had already known of whatever Mokona had been about to say. Then again, she was the Witch of Dimensions. Who was to say she wasn't a seer of some sort as well?

"Artifacts like those are rare, and very hard to come by," Yuui pointed out. "I have a feeling you won't have much trouble getting it all the same. After all, aren't you an infamous antiquities dealer?"

_How does she know that?_ Yuui wondered, while inclining his head to give the woman that point. He thought of the numerous magical artifacts he had collected over the years, because despite their aversion to anything Unnatural, humans would pay handsomely to own something from the supernatural. "If I were to ask for an additional wish, would the price be changed from this artifact to something else?"

"That would be a new wish," Yuuko replied. "The price would also be separate."

"In that case, I would like to make another wish." Yuui glanced down at the fuzzy outline of his hands before glancing back up at the hologram. Somehow, the image was the only thing that was clear in his vision. How had he not noticed that before? "I possessed certain experimental nanites that allowed me to change my appearance at will. The nanites were not meant for long term use, which is what lead to my current predicament." He ignored the whimper from the unnatural resting in his lap. "I do not want a repeat of that by acquiring more of the same; however, I can't allow my alternate identities to all suddenly cease to exist. Would you happen to have something that could help with that? Preferably something with zero magical emissions. I have no wish of getting caught by The Company."

"For the appropriate price, I might."

"Lovely." Yuui grinned. "Then let's talk business."
His shoulders ached, the muscles of his neck straining as he rested his chin on his knees, every
breath burning in his lungs as he tried to readjust his position. The bars dug into his back, muscles
screaming in protest as they were forced to move after hours of inactivity. His mind felt numb,
thoughts chasing each other inside his head. Only the sound of his shallow breathing pierced the
silence.

Closing his eyes made no difference, though it allowed him to pretend that the darkness was only
inside his head. Five days. It had been five days since he'd been locked up like an animal. Five days
since that mockery of an examination by Akira. Five days since his last escape... to call it an
attempt would be an insult to Fai's own intelligence. Ill-conceived, and poorly executed...

He didn't even know what might have happened to Lupa. Maybe she'd been moved into the
Breeding program, just as she had feared. What if something even worse had happened to her? If
Akira discovered the truth about their twins— Fai quickly shoved it away. Stuck in a cage with
nothing but his thoughts for company, he knew that thinking about what ifs would only serve to
drive him insane. And so, he thought back, instead, to the day where it all went wrong.

Five days ago:

He floated in darkness, the weightlessness of nonexistence merging with his existence. He was
nowhere and everywhere at once. The turbulent interdimensional sea surrounded him, buffeting
him from side to side and throwing him against the walls of different realities. Spiderweb cracks
littered the barriers of sound and light and magic, the entirety of existence screaming out as the
anomaly created ripples. Somewhere, unheard outside the interdimensional sea, a bell tolled, and
he was thrown back into his body.

Awareness returned to him bit by precious bit. There was blood thrumming through his body, and a
heart beating in his chest. He inhaled, and air filled his lungs. A bell toll's echo faded into his
subconscious. Fai shuddered as a cool breeze brushed against his exposed skin.

Keeping his eyes closed, Fai frowned at the sudden warmth against his face. The soothing darkness
turned to a mind-numbing orange as Fai turned his head away. The warmth pressed against his left
cheek while the right came in contact with the cool metal of the table that he lay on. Bands of
something cold pressed down on his wrists, his torso and his ankles.

Akira's voice broke through his moment of contemplation. "You might have been telling the truth
when you said you couldn't procreate."

Biting back a groan, Fai squinted at his surroundings. It only took him a moment to realize that he
was back in Akira's lab, bound to the same table where she had experimented on him before.
Trepidation rising, Fai turned his head to the side, noticing the woman with her back towards her,
perusing a set of holographic screens.

A whiff of foreign magic lingered in the air, despite the heavy Cerellium compounds being
pumped through the vents and burning in his blood. Studying the holo-screens, Fai realized that
Akira was running scans on him and Lupa. Looking around, he spotted Lupa's unconscious form
strapped down to another tabletop, partially hidden behind a wheeled cabinet.
"The serum Kyle used on Lupa should have dealt with your impotency, and yet all my scans are returning negative results." A hint of frustration colored Akira's tone. She fell silent.

"Perhaps L-Lupa is unable to have children as well?" he ventured, hoping that would prompt her into providing him with more information. He could vividly recall Kamui confronting Lupa about the pregnancy. He remembered reevaluating his escape plan to make room for Lupa in it. Remembered the subsequent panic attack when he learned she was carrying twins. His breathing hitched, invisible hands squeezing his chest as he felt panic begin to take over. Breathing deeply, he settled his thoughts before some indicator showed up on Akira's scanners.

"Kyle has been monitoring Lupa for months," Akira replied. "There's no reason why Lupa shouldn't have conceived two perfect specimens for me after your tryst that night. And yet, Kyle hasn't spotted any of the typical symptoms associated with Lupine pregnancies. And now with only week until the annual event, your handlers won't let me dose you two again."

He felt a surge of relief. He just needed to stay calm and get through this examination. Then he could figure out a way to get Lupa and his children out of The Company. Now that he knew the truth, Fai would rather die celibate than let something like that happen again. To be forced to take part in something so depraved… Fai shuddered before frowning in contemplation. Why were the scans showing negative results? Kamui and Lupa, they both were convinced that she is expecting my twins.

His attention drifted towards the foreign magical aura that hung in the air around Lupa, despite all the Cerellium compounds. If the twins had inherited his magic, that could explain why the scans were failing to detect the pregnancy. It had been the same with his mother when she had been expecting. He thought back to the half-forgotten text from the medical archives in Ceres. An aura like this could sometimes cloak an unborn child from conventional methods of detection, if the babe possessed strong magic. Fai had no doubt that if the Valerian healer mages had known about there being two, he and his brother would have been killed in the womb like the countless other twins.

Shaking his head, Fai turned his attention back to Akira, hoping the woman would be willing to answer his questions. "What kind of symptoms should she have displayed?"

"Increase in appetite, hormonal changes that are visible in its blood-work, and an increasing difficulty in holding transformations." Akira ticked off each remark with a finger. She positioned a scanner above Lupa and started it up. Fai could attribute the twins' inherent magic to cloaking their presence in the hormonal bloodwork and the scans.

"Why can't you have children?" Akira queried, derailing his train of thought. She turned away from Lupa's scanner and positioned a second machine above Fai, powering it on with a tap of her fingers.

"I was struck by a dark curse," he lied.

The scanner for Lupa beeped as it completed its scan and Akira moved away to look at the results. "Whatever your curse was, you seem to have passed it on to Lupa," Akira grumbled as she shoved away the scanner in disgust. Fai barely managed to withhold the sigh of relief. His children— I'm going to be a father!— were able to cloak themselves despite the Cerellium compounds eating away at their magic.

"That is a possibility," Fai replied glibly. How did Kyle miss Lupa's difficulty in holding her transformations recently? Unless... The scanner above Fai beeped twice and Akira moved to squint at the readings, her lips pulling down in an ugly frown. Why would Kyle risk his position within
"Negative again," Akira mumbled as she turned away and walked back to the holographic console she'd been using when Fai had woken. Taking advantage of her distraction, Fai took the time to scan the room once more, his heart giving a jolt of surprise when he spotted a set of laser scalpels resting on a shelf. They appeared to be similar to the ones Akira had attached with the machines that she had used to gather tissue samples from his organs.

Looking back at Akira to see if she was still preoccupied, Fai tested the extent of his mobility within the restraints. Pleased to find that he could still move his hands, Fai closed his eyes and reached inside him for the tiny reservoir of magic that had recovered after his earlier outburst. Molding it into an invisible spell, Fai nicked several scalpels and hid them away with magic moments before Akira turned back to face him.

"As soon as the finals are over," Akira said as spots of darkness danced across Fai's eyes, "I'm having you two transferred into my care. I'll get those specimens out of you yet." Akira brought up the results for the secondary scanner, her lips puckering in displeasure. "That's not right." Fai's heart stuttered inside his chest as he wondered if she had somehow discovered the truth after all when she went on. "How in the world did you manage to get rid of seventy five percent of the inhibitor nanites?"

"What?" Fai feigned ignorance.

"I wasn't aware that a magical blast could destroy the nanites without blowing up the specimen," Akira murmured to herself, turning her attention towards a scanner hovering above Lupa. She studied the results for a moment before nodding to herself. "As I suspected, fifty percent loss in this one…"

Wait… what? Fifty percent? B-but… how could I have—

"We can't have you giving the others ideas, now can we?" Akira mumbled, turning back to frown at Fai before consulting the results once again.

"It was an accident," Fai blurted, hoping he'd have enough time to recover all the progress he'd made during these past few weeks. He sneaked a glance in Lupa's direction and felt a pang of guilt. Unlike the fiery Lupine he'd come to know, she appeared so young and vulnerable with her face relaxed in unconsciousness. Even if they both shared the blame for their current predicament, Fai owed it to their unborn children to get them all out of The Company's clutches. If all else fails, once the annual event starts, I can get Kamui to help me get rid of the blocks in my brain, Fai decided, thinking of the scalpels he'd stolen and magically stored away.

"Well then, I have just the thing to discourage such accidental destruction of nanites." Akira smiled. She patted him on the head very much like a favored pet, drawing him out of his thoughts. "I'll be back with my latest batch. It's a great deterrent, you see. If even a single nanite is destroyed, it sets off an unstoppable chain reaction. One destroyed nanite and up you go in a crimson shower. It's quite spectacular."

With those words, she turned and exited the lab, humming to herself, acting for all the world as if the annual Patrungote festival had come three months early.

"You destroyed the inhibitors by accident?" Lupa spoke up, startling Fai. How long had she been awake? She turned to look at him, her eyes just as empty of emotion as her voice. "Any chance you can destroy me along with them? After she's injected us with the newest lot of death, that is."
The hopelessness in her tone was so at odds with her character, Fai blinked. "You want me to kill you?"

"Don't think of it as murder," Lupa replied nonchalantly. "Think of it as a mercy killing, or an assisted suicide if that makes you feel better. Beats having to live out the rest of my life as a fucking Breeder, now that Akira knows her plan succeeded."

*She thinks she's going to be transferred to the Breeding Program. But... she doesn't know about the scan results.*

"So, will you do it?" Lupa asked. The slightest traces of hope colored her words before she continued with a sardonic lilt. "Unless you want your kids to act as guinea pigs from the moment they're born. Maybe even before they're born if that bitch can have her way."

*She wants to die...*

"The scans came out negative," Fai murmured, summoning one of the laser scalpels as the first fledglings of an idea formed within his mind. Powering on the scalpels, he focused the beam to cut through the restraint around his left wrist. Fai hissed in pain when the scalpel sliced through his forearm. The gash stung as it sluggishly healed as Fai struggled to find a proper angle to cut into the bonds without hurting himself any further.

"What do you mean they came out negative?" Lupa demanded. "I know what the fuck is going on with my body. I can't hold a fucking transformation for ten minutes without losing control, and you're telling me I'm not pregnant?"

"That's not what I meant," Fai grunted. The scalpel slipped and once again nicked his skin, though raising his head, he could see that he had managed to slice through nearly half of the thick metal band around his wrist. "It's their magic. That can h-happen sometimes when the baby possesses a h-higher than average l-level."

"So... they don't know?" Lupa whispered, eyes wide as she turned her head to look at him. There was a desperate sort of hope on her face.

"They don't," Fai replied, trying to smile in encouragement as the scalpel finished its job. Fai shoved it back in the magical pocket space. Akira could be back any time. He had to break free and transport both himself and Lupa to safety. He might never get another opportunity like this again. "And they won't have to either. We're getting out of h-here, all of us."

With a mighty jerk, Fai summoned all of his vampire strength to wrench free of the weakened restraint. Hastily pulling out the bolts that held the remaining restraints to the table, Fai sat up, the cuffs clattering against the table as he hopped to his feet. He made his way across the room, bending over Lupa to slide the bolts from the restraints around her wrist.

His ears perked at the sound of approaching footsteps in the hallway, and he turned away, looking for a weapon. Behind him, Lupa worked with nimble fingers to free her other arm, just as Fai's eyes landed on an electric saw-like contraption he'd once seen in another technologically advanced world. Grabbing hold of the device, he swung it around to face the door as he tapped his finger across the activation mechanism.

'Access denied.' Intoned a robotic voice as the saw remained useless in his hand. Fai cursed. The doorknob jiggled, and Fai glanced over his shoulder to spot Lupa working on the restraints around her feet. Time... he needed more time. He could get rid of the remaining fifty percent of the nanites by sending a supercharged burst of magic through her system, but that would drain his...
magical reserves to point of exhaustion. He wouldn't be able to cast a teleportation spell. And if he were to take them away without dealing with those first, there was a great chance that he could unintentionally kill the twins.

*I should have thought this through.*

"— and you can see for yourself director that—" Akira broke off mid-sentence as she spotted Lupa working to get free of her ankle restraints before Akira's gaze settled on Fai, who stood behind Lupa, armed with an electric saw. Behind Akira stood a silver-haired woman, dressed in business suit, who surveyed the scene with some mirth.

"Oh dear," said the silver-haired woman who had accompanied Akira, surveying the scene with some mirth. "The mated pair appears to be more resourceful than you thought, Akira."

Akira fumbled for something in her coat pocket when Fai lobbed the useless electric saw at her head. Letting out a startled shriek, Akira fell to the floor in an attempt to dodge the projectile. The plastic remote she'd been retrieving fell from her hands and skidded across the floor.

Summoning his claws, Fai raced towards the scientist, knowing he only had a few precious moments before someone alerted the guards. He crossed the room in a heartbeat, claws poised to stab right through Akira's throat when an unknown force grabbed hold of his body and yanked him back. Fai flew through the air, the breath knocked from his lungs when he collided with the wall opposite to the door.

The smirking, silver-haired woman stepped fully into the room and behind her, a meek Unnatural with stringy brown hair stepped across the threshold. The Unnatural was staring at her feet even as she held out a hand towards Fai. Akira clambered to her feet a little unsteadily, straightening her clothes as she picked up the remote control and retrieved two metallic canisters from her coat.

Finally free of the ankle restraints, Lupa bounded across the room with an enraged snarl, only to be caught by the Unnatural. The girl raised her hand and slammed Lupa into the wall next to Fai. Akira clambered to her feet a little unsteadily, straightening her clothes as she picked up the remote control and retrieved two metallic canisters from her coat.

"Very good, Zero," the woman muttered, patting the Unnatural over the head. The girl whimpered, whispering a barely audible 'Thank you, mistress.' Fai thought he spotted a bit of resemblance between the girl and Akira. They both possessed the same nose and jawline.

"Well, this is a delight," the woman said as she approached Fai. Fai struggled against the force holding him to the wall, but for all the effect his efforts had, his body might as well have been carved out of ice. Reaching out with a well-manicured finger, the woman traced a line across Fai's jaw, appreciation glittering in her dark eyes. "I can see why Naba and Akira were making such a fuss about you. You certainly are a pretty one. And you," here she turned to look at Lupa, "are still such a savage thing. What am I to do with you, Lupa?"

"Go to hell, Bia!" Lupa spat, growling in anger as she struggled against the Unnatural's hold.

"Oh, Maddy," Bia chuckled as Lupa froze at the name. Fai recalled Roy mentioning that her given name was Madiha Shah. *Did Bia know Lupa from before she had been caught by The Company?* "What would Danish say, if he were to hear you use such language? He would be so disappointed."

"Don't say his name," Lupa growled. Glancing at her Fai could see that she had partially transformed into a Lupine. *Please don't lose control of the transformation in front of these two.*

"Is that any way to speak to your beloved cousin, Maddy?" Bia tutted.

*What?*
"So you finally remembered that we're family." Lupa gave a hollow laugh as she lurched against the invisible restraints, somehow managing to move her arm to reach for Bia before having it jerked back by the Unnatural's power. "Have your pet let go of me and I'll show you how much I care for you, cousin." She spat the words like they were something vile.

Bia chuckled at the vitriol before her face grew blank. "Zero."

The Unnatural clenched the hand with which she held Lupa and the Lupine began to choke, gasping for air.

"Stop it," Fai cried. Bia ignored him and stepped closer to Lupa, her expression cold.

"Sentiment is a foolish thing to have," Bia murmured, caressing the side of her cousin's face before tucking a stray strand of hair behind Lupa's ear. All the while Lupa wheezed, unable to breathe. "I thought you would have let go of it, after the way your best friend betrayed you. But still you hold on to the hope that your brother might someday come for you. Haven't you realized it by now, you foolish creature? Danish has no need for a pet Lupine any longer. He has moved on to better things. If he had cared for you, don't you think he would have gotten you out sooner? It's not as if he lacks the means to do so."

Lupa lost control of the transformation. The horrible sound of her choking filled the air as she asphyxiated, her skin turned blue. Fai's heart clenched with fear and he yelled. "Stop it! You're going to kill h-her!"

Bia continued watching her choke, acting as though she hadn't heard him. Fai reached for the meager reserves of his magic, mentally working on a spell to knock out the Unnatural holding them down when Bia held up a hand, "I think that's enough, Zero."

The Unnatural unclenched her fist and Lupa drew in a ragged breath, eyes wide with fright.

"And to think that you could have been standing in my place." Bia shook her head as she turned away with a scoff. "But a mutt can never be equal to the ones who own it. No one cares for you, little Lupine. I suppose your bastard of a sire wants you, but then again, that arrogant mongrel only wants the prized monster it created in you."

"Takes a monster to know a monster, Bia," Lupa gasped, regaining some of her previous bravado, making Bia pause just by the exit. She turned back, her features contorted by hatred as she glared at Lupa.

"Zero!" Bia barked. The little Unnatural clenched her hand into a tiny fist once more. Lupa choked, thrashing against the Unnatural's hold, though Zero did not let go.

"You should have died the night that rabid creature broke into our home," Bia spat.

Finally having gather enough energy for the spell, Fai sent out the threads of runic magic to wrap around Zero. The girl collapsed on the floor in a heap as the spell took effect, and Fai felt the invisible force holding him down vanish. Landing on the floor in a crouch, Fai shot across the room towards Bia, claws outstretched.

Later, he would remember the tongues of flame wrapping along his nerves and setting him alight. At that moment, however, pain smothered his world as his muscles seized. His heart faltered within his chest as an inferno consumed his very being. Far away, he could hear Lupa screaming.

An eternity went by before the fire receded, leaving behind fingers of ice to skitter across his skin.
"Dose it twice." Bia's voice swam through the haze, but she, too, sounded as though she was at the end of a long tunnel. "Dose them both!"

And then as Akira descended upon him with her sharp, piercing needles, the gaping jaws of darkness swallowed Fai whole.

-0-

He came to within the confines of the tiny cage, unceremoniously stuffed inside with his limbs twisted at an awkward angle. It took him a couple of hours to maneuver his body around into a sitting position without dislocation, his muscles burning from exhaustion as the Cerellium bars rubbing against his flesh sapped his body of energy.

Day one passed with him trying to recover his reserves of expended magic, made harder due to steady stream of Cerellium compounds being pumped into the air. He waited for someone to come and take him back to his room at the end of his punishment. No one came, and he fell into a fitful sleep. His dreams, that night, were filled with fields of snow and bodies falling from insurmountable towers.

Day two passed in a similar manner, with him trying to gather his magical reserves, though he'd only managed to recover a fraction of his magic by the end of the day. He waited for a guard to come and take him away, and yet again he fell asleep waiting for someone who never came.

Halfway through day three, Fai made his first attempt at ridding himself of a fraction of the nanites. Constant practice made locating the metallic globules easier, though when it came to magically detonating a tiny fraction, Fai realized that something was wrong. Every time he tried to get rid of a small fraction, every nanite inside his body heated up in response. Denial settled in the pit of his stomach as he spent the rest of the day trying to disprove what Akira had said in the lab.

By day four, Fai came to the awful realization that for once, he had no clever solution to get out of his current predicament. And yet, he refused to give up. He couldn't give up. He had to make it work. He needed it to work. If he couldn't get his technique to work, how would he get free? How would he rescue his unborn children? How would he help Syaoran? How would he… And so, he tried again only to fail but he didn't give up.

Day five arrived, and with it came despair. He lost count of how many times he'd attempted the technique. Lost count of how many times he stopped just a fraction of a second before detonating the nanites.

And still, Fai continued to reach for the drying pool of magic within himself, coaxing the reluctant streams of energy to flow into his body. The magic fizzled out the moment it came in contact with the compounds. Heedless, he pushed on, forcing out more and more of his magic and watching as more and more of it dissipated until finally, a small steady trickle began to move it past the inhibitors, wrapping around a small number of metallic nanites in his bloodstream. The trickle searched for the mechanism that made them work, squeezing to make it break. Every nanite in his body hummed, heating up in response to the attempted detonation. Fai stopped.

Letting his head collide with the bars behind his back, he let out a mirthless chuckle. *I can't do it.* No matter how many times he tried, the result was always the same. He couldn't isolate these new nanites. *I've failed, Kuro-chi…*

It felt like shards of glass in his lungs, tearing through his insides as a tear dribbled down his cheeks. *Sakura-chan…* Digging his fingernails into the palms of his hands he laughed *Syaoran-kun…* The laughter devolved into cackling of a madman as the tears flowed freely. *Lupa… Slowly,*
the laughing died away, the silence broken only by sobs as hopelessness descended.

*I'm so, so sorry.*

Chapter End Notes

And after holding on for so long, Fai has finally hit rock bottom as things are looking somewhat hopeless for him, Lupa and their unborn twins. Leave me a comment with your thoughts and don't forget to feed the plot bunnies with what you might think could happen next ;)
Syaoran wandered through the tunnels at the end of his supervisory shift, heading deep into the mines. The roughly hewn passages sloped downwards, lit by weak, flickering bulbs set at long intervals – the darkness stretched out to cover much larger areas in between the parts where light shone. Whenever he reached a fork in the tunnels, he would take a moment to stand and study the two equally dark passageways before picking the one on the right. He always picked the right tunnel. In a way, he decided it was a good decision since it would simplify his path for whenever he decided to head back to Meiling's apartment.

With nothing but the sound of his footsteps echoing across the rocks for company, Syaoran found his thoughts drifting back to the conversation he'd had with Touya. The man hadn't given him a definitive answer for when he would be able to speak with Kuanos. Touya had cited some difficulties faced by the Liberalists in getting Kuanos to agree to request. Given how desperate he had been to speak with Syaoran when Kuanos had visited the Scavenger base, he had trouble believing Touya's explanation.

What made Kuanos change his mind? Syaoran wondered as he descended deeper into the darkness. Why would he—Syraoran stopped, feeling a shift in the air as he reached a fork. Inky blackness stared out at him with a gaping maw in the right tunnel and somewhere further down that way, he could hear the sound of falling water. Syaoran frowned, turning his head just enough to focus his vampire hearing in that direction. That's strange. Touya never mentioned any underground rivers or streams going through these mines.

Syaoran called on his vampire vision and the world was immediately lit up in shades of amber, letting him see the uncertain path ahead. The rough tunnel was littered with rocks of varying sizes with a few sharp ones jutting outwards at dangerous angles. He wouldn't have been able to see those without the aid of his enhanced sight. Without hesitation, Syaoran strode into the dark passage.

-0-

Kurogane tried not to let his discomfort show as he let Subaru feed from the cut on his wrist. Five days. It had been five days since he'd marched out on the Liberalists and met Subaru. Five days since he should have been posing as a slave entering the Final round of the Gladiator Program sent in by the private sponsors. Five days since his latest near death experience after losing his only chance to rescue the mage.

"Thank you, Kurogane-san," Subaru murmured, wiping off a stray droplet of blood from his lips with a small paper napkin. Cat-like eyes peaked at him through long lashes and for a moment he remembered the cold, uncomfortable nights in Infinity when he had forced the mage to feed. Kurogane grunted noncommittally.

"I've managed to acquire the maps for the tunnel system that runs underneath the wastelands," Subaru told him in the accented Japanese that Kurogane had long since grown accustomed to. "I know you'd been planning to enter the tournament under the guise of an enslaved Lupine but---"

"You also know why I never went through with that," Kurogane cut him off gruffly, his temper
rising. These days anger always lurked so close to the surface.

"I know," Subaru agreed, calm and unflappable as always. "There wasn't anything you could have done."

Coming from someone else, the words could have sounded demeaning, patronizing, but when Subaru said it, they were tinged with sincerity. "Now that I have the maps for the tunnel systems, we no longer need for you to go in as an undercover slave. Once the tournament begins in earnest and we have a lock on their location, you can simply sneak in and retrieve them both."

Subaru wanted his brother out of that place just as badly as Kurogane wanted the mage. The Liberalists had been willing to help him by providing the disruptor nanites. Kurogane didn't see any reason as to why that would have to change just because the original plan was no longer viable. And yet, looking at Subaru's face, Kurogane knew the young vampire was still bothered by something.

"What is it?"

"In order to gain access to the wastelands, we will need to utilize the mining tunnels run by the Scavengers."

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The sound of falling water grew louder the further he walked, though as he drew closer to its location, he realized it wasn't a single waterfall but several, the sound interspersed by the steady trickle of shallower streams. A brilliant light pierced the darkness at the end of the tunnel. Syaoran let the transformation fade away before it could blind him. The eerie amber gave way to honeyed gold as the light spilled into the tunnel from whatever lay beyond it. Syaoran slowed his approach as a melodious hum filled the tunnels, soft and distinctly feminine.

His brows furrowed in confusion. Who would be down here?

Taking care not to make a sound, Syaoran edged his way to the mouth of the cavern, for it was a vast cavern up ahead, washed in buttery sunlight, the scent of wet earth and stones carrying over to him on a light breeze. There was an undertone of something sweet and floral, causing a rush of nostalgia in his heart even though Syaoran couldn't remember ever having come across the scent before. He paused by the opening, choosing to remain in the shadows, feeling the breath catch in his throat as he saw the person within the cavern.

The woman was a vision draped in layers of white, like a princess straight out of an epic fairytale. The style of clothing was unlike any he had encountered before, but it looked breathtaking on her, contrasting nicely with her tanned skin. She wore a lot of gold, delicate chains of varying length hanging from her neck, embellished with jeweled beads that sparkled like tiny stars. Her arms were adorned with bangles, each carved with a flowing script. A multitude of gold chains were also looped around her waist like belts. Gold coins decorated with the same flowing script as the bangles hung from the ties.

She stood in a shallow pool of water that reached barely to mid-calf. Multiple waterfalls and streams trickling down the rocky walls of the cavern fed into it. Syaoran could see where the water fell, and yet the surface of the pool was calm like a mirror, reflecting its surroundings with perfect clarity. The woman stood with her eyes closed and hands clasped in front of her chest, facing the right wall as she continued humming that haunting melody. The wall before her glowed with the same calligraphic designs as the ones adorning her jewelry and Syaoran realized with a jolt that he could actually understand what it said.
Unable to contain his curiosity, Syaoran took a step across the threshold, forgetting for a moment that he had been trying to keep his presence concealed. His foot collided with a rock, sending it skittering across the floor and the sound echoed across the large cavern,startling the woman. Her eyes shot open as she whirled in his direction and Syaoran felt the apology freeze upon his lips.

Her eyes were a deep shade of emerald, but it was the depth of emotions shining in them that made Syaoran's jaw dropped open. "Syaoran!" the woman yelled before racing across the space that divided them. Syaoran barely managed to catch her as she wrapped her arms around him, enveloping him a hug that was as warm as the sunshine lighting the cavern.

"Who…"

"I was so worried about you!" she cried, and Syaoran was surprised by the dampness that soaked through his shirt. She drew away, eyes shining with happiness as she looked at him in a way that Meiling never had. In that moment, Syaoran found his thoughts drifting back to the story Kuanos had told him of the princess from the desert. The woman that he had supposedly sacrificed seven years of his life for without a moment's hesitation. Hadn't he first encountered the princess in a cavern full of magical water, according to that story?

"Sakura?" Syaoran murmured, the name rolling across his tongue like it belonged there.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said with a grin, wiping a tear trailing down her cheek.

"This..." He trailed off, looking at the cavern's roof in disbelief at the midday sun. Surely he hadn't wandered the tunnels all night? Glancing down at the digital watch he wore, he confirmed that it had only been two hours since the shift's end. "This isn't really a part of the mines, is it?"

"No." The woman, Sakura, shook her head. "The reservoir is still inside the ruins at Clow. It's just that the convergence has created a temporary link between our two locations."

"Convergence?" Syaoran asked, unease slowly stirring in his gut. *This doesn't feel right.*

"It's what Yukito-san is calling the equilibrium shift in space-time continuum," she explained, her smile turning sheepish. "Timelines of all the dimensions are moving, slipping through time itself. There's—" she paused, looking away as she bit her lip "—some sort of anomaly, creating an imbalance. The convergence is a result of reality trying to set itself right once again. This is... Oh Syaoran." She threw her arms around him once more, burying her face in his chest. "This is like Fei Wang Reed all over again."

Syaoran patted her back in an awkward attempt at comfort, not really sure how to help the woman who seemed to know him, or at least a version of him. Even though he had been skeptical of Kuanos's story, it was hard to not believe the man's words when he had a sobbing princess in his arms. *Are all women like this?* he thought, wondering if perhaps Kuanos had been telling the truth after all. Meiling had acted the same way. But why had Touya lied to him? And why was every Scavenger going along with the deception? Surely, he wasn't that important. He didn't even have any substantial memories. Either Kuanos or Touya was lying to him, but to what end?

His attention was drawn towards the sunlight dancing across the shallow waves on the surface of the lake. *She was using magic to hold the water still?*

"Is Fai-san with you?" she asked. "I've been trying to get in touch with him, but something keeps blocking my spells. Is he all right? Tomoyo-chan told me that Kurogane-san was separated from
you guys somehow, but don't worry, he's searching for you too."

"Fai?" he said, thinking back to the blond hybrid he had seen in the televised match for The Company. "No, I haven't met my sire yet."

"Your sire?" Sakura pulled away to look at him once more, confusion clear in her pretty green eyes. "What do you mean?"

"According to Director Bia, Fai was the one who turned me into a Vampirosa," he replied, his hand subconsciously traveling to scars around his heart. Pain pinched at his temples. Her warm fingers connected with the scars through his shirt and she gasped. Eyes wide, she met his gaze. Her voice was bare above a whisper when she spoke. "What happened? Why did he— What made him turn you into a vampire?"

In the distance a bell tolled, the sound creating a hollow echo throughout the cavern.

"I don't know. I've lost all of my memories."

"No." The color drained from Sakura's face as she took a step back, fear flashing in her eyes as she looked him over. "That was just a dream. This… this shouldn't be happening," Worrying her lip, she met his gaze. "H-How did you lose your memories?"

"Head injury from a mining accident," Syaoran replied, wincing at the sensation of a white hot knife poking at his brain. The bell tolled once more, the sound shaking the very ground beneath their feet. A wave of dizziness washed over him and Syaoran dropped to his knees.

"Syaoran!" Sakura cried as she rushed to his side and reached for his arm. Her fingers ghosted right through him, and when Syaoran tried to grab her hand instead, it phased right through hers. An indescribable sense of loss welled in his heart as he stared down at the spot where his hand should have met hers. "What's wrong?"

The bell tolled once more and he tried to hide his wince. "It's just a headache," he mumbled, trying to reassure her even though he had begun to massage his temples with his fingers. He waited for the vertigo to pass before attempting to stand. Maybe I should head back to the apartment and get some rest.

The bell tolled louder just as he managed to get back on his feet. His unsteady legs folded underneath him and he collapsed as the ground began to shake. A jagged rock dug into his ribs, the sharp jolt of pain nothing compared to the bolt of lightning that struck his brain, leaving him gasping for breath. The ghostly outline of Sakura hovered by his side, her intangible fingers skittering across his skin as the sunny afternoon light began to fade. Her lips moved, though he couldn't hear her past the rushing in his ears. The only sound louder was the tolling of the bell.

Something warm trickled down his nose, the taste of copper exploding across his tongue. Rather than leaving him invigorated, the blood only turned him into a sick, shivering mess.

"I'm fine," he murmured at the fading apparition of the woman in white. To prove his point, he tried to push himself into a sitting position, but his limbs had no strength. There was a brief feeling of cracks spidering across his soul before it shattered and a wave of hot and cold filled him. It set him ablaze, hundreds of flaming tongues licking at his insides, slowly consuming him until he couldn't even tell where he ended and the pain began. Agony surrounded him, lovingly taking his existence into its arms. It coursed through his veins in frigid waves until he was bathed in it. He was fire. He was ice.
Blood trailed down his cheeks, filling his throat as he attempted to crawl across the darkening tunnel. He had to get back. He had to get help. Someone would notice he was missing when he didn't show up for his shift in the morning, but morning was so far away. He needed help now. He needed to— He was fading. He was creation. He was destruction.

The sound of the tolling bell reverberated within his chest, deafeningly loud, and a coughing fit wracked his trembling body, tearing at his throat as he spat out a thick globule of blood. Sakura and her sunlit cavern were nothing more than faint outlines by now, though Syaoran's focus was elsewhere. *I have to get back to the surface.*

His breath whistled in and out of his lungs. With each toll of the bell, Syaoran could sense the passage of time, but he felt disconnected from his body. He watched himself from far away, writhing on the ground in agony but no… that was some else. He was…

He was the light. He was the dark.

He was everything. He was nothing.

*Who am I…*

The next bell toll threw him back in the body convulsing alone in the dark tunnel.

Syaoran threw back his head and screamed.

Chapter End Notes

So this is a little shorter compared to last chapter but STUFF happened and that's progress, right? Kurgane's POV is next chapter though we'll also be finding out a bit more about what happened to Syaoran. Speaking of what happened to Syaoran, I'd love to hear your thoughts on that. Do you think either Kuro or Fai will be able to save him?
Kurogane easily kept pace with Subaru as they climbed up the steep hillside that housed the Scavengers’ base. The only other time he'd come to the base had been with Fuuma when Souma had teleported them into the dungeons. And after the transformation and his subsequent talk with the kid, she'd taken them directly back to the Liberalists. So Kurogane's only impression of the base was from the inside of a dungeon where he'd spent the entire night howling in agony.

Far from the city, Kurogane was disappointed to note that the air wasn’t quite pure, even if lacked Cavahall’s ever-present stench of decay and chemical rain. Then again, hardy shrubs clicking to life were the only vegetation around for miles. Sweat trickled down his back, making his t-shirt cling to his skin, the humidity and lack of a breeze only serving to add to the discomfort.

Subaru had insisted on parking the jeep in a concealed spot at the base of the hill and making the climb on the foot. According to the young vampire, their visit was unannounced, and given the Touya's Lupine territorial aggression, the best approach would be the one that gave the Scavenger's plenty of warning of their arrival. The sick bastard must get his kicks out of making everyone crawl up to his domain. Cavahall’s Touya was just as twisted as every other counterpart of people Kurogane knew in this world. Tomoyo was jaded, all jaggedly broken pieces of the princess he loved held together by the unreliable glue of rage. That bastard Yuui… well maybe he didn't qualify as the mage’s counterpart but unlike the blond Kurogane actually cared for, Cavahall’s version was a slimy, greedy piece of shit. And this Touya, like the king of Clow, held a position of control, but while that Touya genuinely cared for his subjects this mocking caricature was only in it for the power trip.

By the time they reached the perimeter markers, a man Kurogane recalled encountering in Infinity, was waiting for them, the light of the rising sun casting a halo of orange behind him. Kurogane wiped at the sweat dripping into his eyes as Subaru greeted the man. “Good morning, Lantis-san. We were hoping to speak with Lady Emeraude, if she is available?”

To Kurogane’s surprise, the vampire's words were missing the accent. Must be back within the manju's range, he thought, glancing around. A part of him wished the white creature would come hopping out of the underbrush while crying his name in its shrill voice. But then he remembered the spell that the witch had cast to alter his features and realized with a pang of disappointment that even if the meatbun was hiding somewhere nearby, it wouldn't recognize him.

"Emeraude is currently busy with a patient,” Lantis replied, unaware of Kurogane’s inner turmoil. "I can't say how long she might be."

"It's okay." Subaru smiled. "We're willing to wait."

"You might end up waiting for a long time," the man warned, though he turned and gestured for them to follow.

"We don't mind," Subaru said as they continued trekking up the hillside, the ground slowly leveling out as the rocky terrain gave way to cobblestone streets and rows upon rows of tiny cottages. In the distance, he spotted a set of towering buildings that looked like some sort of apartment complex, and he wondered just how many Unnaturals occupied the settlement. The Scavenger led them towards the last row of cottages that were located near one of the entrances to
the mines. Sunlight painted the sleepy little settlement in golds and pinks, dusting the edges of the buildings and daubing the stone walkways with a faint glow as morning crept past the horizon. The view would have been spectacular had Kurogane been the sort of man to care. As it was, his attention was drawn towards the high pitched shrieks that could be heard coming from the last cottage.

The Scavenger leading them looked startled upon hearing the screams, though he broke out into a run after only a moment's hesitation. Kurogane was pleased to note that he didn't have any trouble keeping up with the man. Their guide disappeared through the doorway of the cottage though when they crossed the threshold, the scavenger was hovering nervously inside what appeared to be some sort of waiting area. From the looks of it, the cottage had been converted into some sort of medical facility. He could hear raised voices coming from a narrow hallway that led deeper into the building.

"Wrong! Wrong! Wrong!" cried a woman, the same one who had been shrieking earlier.

"Freya, sweetie, it's okay," Masooma said, her soothing voice carrying a hint of magic. What the hell is she doing with the Scavengers?

"No! You don't understand," came Freya's reply. "It's wrong! It is making everything wrong!"

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

Kurogane nearly groaned when he recognized Touya's voice. Great, the bastard is in there too…

"It is dying," Freya whimpered. "And it is killing the world with it. It's all wrong. It should not be here. It's wrong! Wrong! Wrong!"

Kurogane's senses prickled at the focused buildup of magical energy in the other room before Freya's cries tapered off into silence.

"I don't know about him being wrong," Masooma sighed heavily, the sound of rustling fabric reaching Kurogane's ears, "but I do agree with Freya on one thing, Touya. Your friend is definitely dying and I'm not sure how to help him."

"Aren't you supposedly one of the best in your field?" Touya growled. The wolf stirred in the back of Kurogane's mind at the sound of its Alpha.

"It doesn't mean I can cure a disease that defies logic," Masooma shot back, irritation clear in her tone. Kurogane could picture her eyes flashing with defiance, could imagine the little furrow of her brow that went with it. He knew she had the guts to face down an alpha werewolf, she’d done it often enough with Kurogane, after all. The fact that they were currently in said alpha’s territory wouldn’t phase the healer. "At least not within half an hour of encountering it. None of my spells are taking for long. The Vampirosa accelerated healing factor is helping keep the damage at bay but… I'm sorry, Touya. I'm going to need more time to come up with a definitive prognosis. I had hoped Freya would be able to help him, but merely being in the boy's presence is causing her distress."

"Souma can take her back to your base," Touya growled after a moment's pause. He figured the alpha might have partially transformed if the agitation of Kurogane’s wolf was any indication. "You, on the other hand, need to figure out what is wrong with the boy and fix him."

"Please don't forget that I'm here as a favor on Tomoyo's behalf," Masooma replied, her tone frigid. "I'm not one of your flunkies, so don't think you get to treat me like you treat them. If you—"
broke off, and Kurogane picked up the clatter of hurried footsteps.

A third, feminine voice spoke up, this one carrying the same cultured lilt to her words as Subaru. "Masooma, your stabilizing spells appears to be unraveling. The little one's bleeding is worsening."

"Damn it!" Masooma cursed. "At this rate, we're going to have to put him in stasis." Her voice grew distant, and Kurogane supposed she must have retreated further into the clinic with the other woman. A click of a doorway cut off her voice completely.

The Scavenger who had been hovering near the doorway cleared his throat and walked into the hallway. "Touya, we've got a couple of visitors for Emeraude."

Taking that as their cue, Kurogane and Subaru stepped across the threshold and followed their guide. Touya paused in his pacing, turning to face them, his eyes widening momentarily when he spotted Kurogane. The expression cleared quickly though, gaining a calculating glint instead when he saw Subaru. "Kuanos, you've made a new friend. And abandoned your old ones, it would seem."

Kurogane crossed his arms and gave the man a flat stare in reply, silently taking in the Lupine's haggard appearance. Touya was pale, his hair was in a complete disarray and the stubble stood out in stark contrast on his face. His hands and clothes were covered in an alarming amount of nearly dried blood.

"Emeraude is preoccupied at the moment," Touya told them, unconcerned with being observed as he turned fully towards Kurogane. "Have you decided to leave the Liberalists? I was told that none of them could reach you this past week."

"Why do you care?" Kurogane grunted, recalling at the last minute that in order for Subaru's plan—whatever that might be—to succeed, they would need Touya's cooperation.

"I did sire you, Kuanos," Touya pointed out with a lopsided grin, completely at odds with his earlier behavior. Crazy bastard. Kurogane internally scoffed as said bastard continued to speak. "If your falling out with the Liberalists has left you with no place to stay, you are more than welcome to join the family."

"Why were you looking for me?" Kurogane asked, choosing not to respond to the man's offer.

"Syaoran wanted to speak with you again, but…" The man trailed off, letting the silence hang between them as he glanced towards the hallway that led deeper into the cottage.

Something like fear wrapped its cold arms around his heart, chilling the blood pumping in his veins until a solid block of ice settled in the pit of his stomach. The blood covering Touya took on an entirely new meaning. "But what?" Kurogane demanded. "What happened to the kid?"

"We're not sure," Touya replied, his manipulative mask slipping to show genuine dismay. "I found him collapsed in the mines this morning, bleeding heavily, but with no visible injuries whatsoever. You claim to have known him from before?"

"And you told him he belonged in your world," Kurogane snapped back as he took a step towards the alpha.

"I admit, I could have been wrong." Touya shrugged. The tenuous hold Kurogane had had over his anger broke. He shot towards the alpha with a wordless cry, wrapping clawed hands around the Lupine's throat as Kurogane shoved him into the wall.

"Kuanos-san!" Subaru cried in alarm, but Kurogane ignored the younger vampire.
"You admit you could have been wrong?" Kurogane spat, his words coming out garbled through his partially transformed mouth. "You've been lying to the kid all this time, and you fucking admit you could have been fucking wrong?!

"I might have mistaken him for someone else," Touya replied, unconcerned by the claws poised perfectly over his jugular. "Don't you think you might be overreacting?"

"Overreact— the kid is dying! After what those assholes at The Company did to him, you fed him lies about where he came from." Rage bubbled inside him. The blood pounded in his ears, a persistent ringing drowning out Subaru's protests. "You took advantage of him and now he's dying, and you think I'm fucking overreacting?"

The kid was bleeding, dying, and there was nothing Kurogane could do to help him. He didn't know where the manju was, and the mage was trapped in a hellhole, and there was not a single fucking thing he could do to save the kid because he had no means to send the boy away. He was completely useless and the bastard had the gall to suggest that Kurogane was overreacting!

He shook with fury, the nerves and muscles in his arms strained to their limit as his vision hyper-focused on the Lupine trapped between his hands. His chest heaved and his bones creaked from the effort it took to contain himself. But the wolf in him didn't want to hold back. It wanted the bastard to break. Wanted that asshole to feel every moment of agony his actions had forced the kid to feel. The wolf’s bloodlust rose to the fore and he sank his claws into flesh. Pain from his transformation barely even registered as his mind shifted. The primal side of his mind shoved away what little rationality remained. The wolf howled for blood.

This wolf/not-wolf before him was the reason the kid was dying. He liked playing mind games. Mind games that were killing one of his. And so, this other had to die. He squeezed, claws digging deeper into flesh.

Flames of agony slashed across his exposed abdomen and a boulder smashed against his ribs, sending him skidding across the floor. The other explosively shed his non-wolf form, and in his place stood the Alpha.

Fear doused the rage and he whimpered, stepping back on paws slick with blood. The Alpha snarled and he flattened his ears in submission. The taste of iron was strong on his tongue as the Alpha advanced. Nearby, a bloodsucker made to move closer, halting only at the Alpha's enraged snarl.

You dare to attack me? The sounds issued from the Alpha's strange wolf/not-wolf mouth. After everything I have done for you? After I helped you! I turned you and you dare to challenge me? No. No challenge. The wolf whined, sinking to the ground at the Alpha loomed above him. The not-wolf part of him raged. You tried to manipulate me! He tried to subdue that part of him, but the not-wolf howled. He fought for dominance, trying to take over, but he resisted. No challenge.

Fighting the Alpha meant death. Cold and clammy fear settled in his heart. It made him weak, and that was when the not-wolf surged upwards. He took over and he felt himself shift into a wolf-not-wolf creature like the Alpha. The intensity of the terror lessened just enough for Kurogane to reassert his control.

"You are nothing but a manipulative bastard," he growled, baring his teeth at Touya. "You're in love with the power you have over these people. And the idea that I don't submit to you like some lackey... I bet that really pisses you off."
"I couldn't care less what you do with yourself," Touya snapped. Subaru shifted in obvious discomfort at the confrontation, though he stayed put.

"And yet, you couldn't resist offering me the honor of being a part of your little family," Kurogane scoffed, meeting the Alpha's glare with one of his own. "You're no better than The Company."

Touya's features twisted in rage. He shot towards Kurogane with a howl and Kurogane met the blow with one of his own. The world rushed away from Kurogane with a roar as the Alpha's attack sent him crashing through a wall. He landed in the sickbay, upending and destroying several empty beds before he managed to dig in his claws to stop. Pain blossomed in his chest and Kurogane found it hard to breathe as he struggled back to his feet. Spitting out a mouthful of blood as his broken ribs reset with several loud snaps, Kurogane crouched low and growled at other Lupine in challenge, ignoring the pitiful whimpering of the wolf in his head. He would damn well challenge that lying, manipulative bastard and beat him to a bloody pulp, if he wanted to. Alpha or no, it made no fucking difference to him.

He managed to get in all of two hits before Touya had a hand around Kurogane’s throat, lifting him into the air as though he weighed nothing. Kurogane flew through another wall, plaster and broken bricks raining down on him as he crashed into a cot. A woman cried in alarm, but he was already tearing through the hole. Putting his whole weight into the punch, he smashed his fist into Touya's jaw, feeling the satisfying crunch of bone under his knuckles. Touya soared across the length of the room, bringing the wall down upon impact. Kurogane smirked in satisfaction when the alpha emerged from the rubble, looking dazed. His lower jaw hung loose as he staggered to his feet, shaking his head like a dog. They were upon each other moments later.

Primal instincts took over before long and soon the fight had devolved into a flurry of clawing and biting. They smashed through the clinic, ignoring the cries of distress around them. Later, Kurogane would wonder at the number of patients their fight might have managed to traumatize or injure, but right now all he knew was his hatred for the monster before him.

"Enough!"

Ropes of crimson magic wrapped around his limbs, wrenching him away from Touya. The jarring action shoved away the haze of animalistic fury that clouded his mind as Kurogane found himself immobile and hovering in the air. He blinked. Across from him on the other side of the demolished room, Touya hung in the air like a life-size marionette with ropes of magic wrapped around his limbs. The only reason the structure didn’t come collapsing down on their heads were the thick, runic chains of magic wrapped around the supports beams of the building. Masooma stood between them, hands outstretched towards him and Touya. Her eyes glowed with the power she commanded, her hair flying behind her despite the absence of a wind.

"If you two are done knocking the fucking building to the ground, get the hell out of here!"

Kurogane felt the crimson strands of her magic sinking into his flesh, pressing and squeezing until he lost his hold over the transformation. Across from him, Touya let out a yelp as he too was forcibly reverted. Souma appeared in front of her in a flash of dark smoke, and Masooma all but snarled. "Don't even think about it, Souma."

Glancing around, Kurogane could see a small crowd had gathered outside of the destroyed clinic, most of the scavengers still in their sleeping clothes. Morning light illuminated the wreckage around them in tones of soft pinks and reds. A white-faced Subaru stood next to Emeraude, the latter looking extremely displeased.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Touya roared when Souma stayed put, observing the witch through narrowed eyes.
"Saving my patient," Masooma snapped back. "Unless, of course, you care more about this impromptu pissing contest."

"Let go of me, witch," Touya growled, straining against her magic when she made no moves to obey his command. Masooma's brow furrowed, her lips pinched together in a silent battle of wills though soon it became evident that her magic was strong enough to keep him in his human form. Touya’s face twisted, his mouth foaming with rage, eyes wild and blood splattered across his face, looking damn ready to kill her. And still, Masooma barely flinched. He'd always believed her to be a healer more than a warrior, but seeing her face down the near rabid Alpha werewolf and winning, Kurogane had to admit he was impressed.

"No. And you need to calm down," the witch said, and Kurogane felt more than saw the magical ropes pulsed with energy at those words. A sense of calm enveloped his mind, the lingering haze of rage giving way to crystalline tranquility. Across from him, Touya's struggles died down within seconds as he gave up on trying to break free, content to hang in the air. Once she was certain that neither of them would attack her, she lowered her hands and they both lowered to the ground. A trickle of her power remained behind, wrapped around both his wrists to send out the soothing waves of magic, but the rest of the ropes dissolved to nothingness. Souma was at Touya's side in an instant, standing between the Alpha and the healer, though Touya appeared calm enough not to attack Masooma.

"Let's not do that again," Masooma sighed and nearly sagged to the ground. Emeraude flashed to catch the witch before she could collapse. Ignoring the admonishing look Emeraude shot her, she struggled back to her feet as the invisible wind whipping around her hair died down and traced out a runic spell that shot towards a mound of rubble and slowly began clearing out a path for them. Turning back to him and Touya she waved towards the newly created passage. "Shall we?"

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Ten minutes later, Kurogane found himself standing in a cramped room with only Souma, Touya, Subaru and Masooma for company. The room was under Emeraude’s office, its entrance hidden behind a filing cabinet of all things. Emeraude herself was busy helping her assistant and the volunteers shift the clinic’s patients into a nearby cottage.

Touya and Souma had claimed a couple of chairs in one corner of the room while Kurogane stood with Subaru near a wall watching Masooma flit about the room, her attention focused on the pair of unconscious patients in the middle. Two elegant feathers hovered inside a glass case setup above the cots wreathed in delicate strings of crimson spells. The hair on his arms were standing up on ends from the magic pouring off of the feathers which Kurogane suspected to be memories, though not belonging the princess. Sakura memory feathers had all been fat at the base and white as snow with those distinct, red markings but the brown and green feathers inside the case narrow and much long, lacking any sort of pattern whatsoever.

A different set of memories then. Kurogane concluded, keeping the demands for an explanation to himself. The healer was focused on saving the kid’s life with her dancelike spellcasting and Kurogane could wait long enough for her to be finished before interrupting. Stasis, she had called the set of runic strings she was weaving around the kid’s prone form, though Kurogane could see how parts of the spells kept disintegrating. She was patching them up faster now than ten minutes ago when almost all of the threads had vanished but the magic wasn’t stable yet. The healer had a skill that rivaled the mage and while she might not have had the same amount of magic, Kurogane knew from the way she had easily subdued Touya that her magic was still pretty damn powerful. So why did her spells keep breaking down?
Kurogane frowned in thought as he focused his attention on the kid. Syaoran wore nothing save for a pair of shorts, his body and the sheets below him covered in blood, though just as Touya had said, Kurogane could spot no visible injuries. The kid squirmed, expression drawn in pain but the runes wrapped around his wrists and ankles held the boy in place. A crimson tear escaped from the kid's eye and dribbled down the side of his face to mingle with the blood welling from his ear. If it weren't for the pair of breathing tubes going down his nose, Kurogane suspected the kid would have been bleeding from there as well.

His gaze drifted towards the cot next to the kid's, occupied by a transformed *Lupine* surrounded by similar thread of crimson and golden runes. The spells were linked the memory feathers, drawing on their magic but the stasis spell surrounding this patient was steady. He didn't need to look very closely at that familiar shade of auburn hair to confirm that it was the Cavahall's counterpart of the princess. Even in *Lupine* form, she looked far too young to bear the amount of scars that marred her skin and Kurogane found himself gritting his teeth as his mind brought up one idea after another as to how she might have ended up in that state. From the looks of things it had been a long time since she had been placed in this lonely, underground room. Kurogane glanced at Touya who had a firm scowl plastered on his face but for once, a hint of humanity shone in his sorrowful eyes as he stared at his sister. So somewhere hidden deep beneath that smarmy, greedy exterior, the bastard did have a heart after all.

"I've managed to put him in stasis," Masooma said as she stepped away from the bed. The pen sticking out of the hair bun atop her head drew his attention momentarily, and he realized that not only had he lost the hairclip he'd intended to return to her, he'd also forgotten the exact number of days that had passed since he'd arrived in Cavahall. *We've never stayed in a place this long. What if I can't get the kid out of here in time?* His heart plummeted at the thought, the sinking, gripping feeling of dread intensifying at the worry clearly visible in her expression. "But I don't know how long it will last. I've anchored the spells to the feathers and they're stable for now but his body is shutting down."

"Being in this world is what's killing him," Kurogane said as he pushed away from the wall and walked over to the witch. He stared at the kid's pale face, listening to the breath rattle in the boy's chest despite the tubes shoved through his nose, and felt a pang of guilt in squeeze his heart. *I'm fucking useless!* He reached out and rested a hand on Syaoran's hair, eyes going wide in surprise at the heat radiating from his skin. Almost as if the kid was burning. *The mage was always cold to the touch..."

"What do you know about this?" Touya demanded.

"It's part of a price he paid for a wish," Kurogane answered, more for the healer's benefit than for Touya's. "He needs to keep moving between worlds to stay alive. If we're ever in a place for more than a fortnight, he falls ill."

"If that were true, he should have died by now," Souma pointed out. "He's been with us for much longer than that."

"I guess that must be why the mage turned him," Kurogane sighed, turning away from the boy. "If they'd been trapped inside The Company for a while, the price began taking its toll on the kid and as he grew worse, the mage might not have had any other choice."

"This mage, he's the *Hybrid* you're trying to rescue, correct?" Touya's ears perked up in interest.
Kurogane merely narrowed his eyes, daring the bastard to finish voicing that demented thought. Touya said nothing as he leaned back in chair, appearing satisfied.

"How long will you be able to keep the kid in stasis?" Kurogane directed the question at the witch, knowing that if he looked at Touya too long, he'd be tempted to smash the bastard's face.

"It depends," she said, looking at the spells she'd woven around the feathers. "A couple of weeks if the runework holds. Maybe a month? These memories are helping for now, but I'll need to monitor his condition to be certain."

Long enough for me to find the manju, Kurogane nodded. The dimension hopper would be able to take the kid away even if Kurogane had to stay behind for the mage. He glanced at the feathers hovering above the two kids and frowned. He had no idea how the kid had managed to lose his memories in the form of feathers but he was certain they belonged to the kid though he doubted Touya would be amenable to parting with them. I'll have to find some way to send those with him.

"Would leaving this world help him?" Subaru asked, directing the question at Kurogane.

He blinked. "What?"

"You said being here is what is killing your friend." Subaru explained. "Would he recover if he were to leave Cavahall?"

"He's been fine before." Kurogane nodded thinking back to the couple of times when they'd been unable to leave immediately once the manju's earring had begun to glow.

"I see." Subaru nodded, hesitating for a brief moment before he turned to Touya. "Touya-san, I was going to have Emeraude-san make this request on my behalf, but seeing as we are all here: Kuanos-san and I will need access to your mines once the tournament begins. I believe one of the shafts leads to a cave system situated out in the wastelands?"

Touya quirked a brow, clearly interested. "So that's how you're planning on getting to your brother."

"Yes." Subaru nodded and turned to Kurogane. "I know of someone who might be able to help your dying friend."

"Who?" Kurogane hated feeling of relief offered by the vampire's words. If he'd known where the manju was, he'd have told me.

"You know of the Wishing Shop?"

"What of it? If there'd been a way to get in touch with the other kid, I would have done it already!"

"The owner has the power to pull people across dimensions," Subaru explained. Kurogane wondered how much Subaru had been told about him and the others. The Witch must have somehow known the future and arranged to have him sent to Kurogane now, but did Subaru know about the change in ownership for the shop? Had he known that Kurogane was a dimension traveler using something of the Witch's to travel? "Maybe if we send Syaoran-kun to the shop, he might be able to recover until we retrieve Fai-san?"

"That's all brilliant; however," Touya cut in before Kurogane could answer. Irritation blossomed in his chest as Kurogane glowered at the alpha, but then the ropes of magic around his wrists pulsed and the anger dimmed to a slow smolder. "If you want to access the tunnels, I want something in return."
The bastard paused letting the words hang in the air until Kurogane snapped in impatience. "What is it?"

"The company uses inhibitor nanites to confine its champions to the wastelands," Touya said instead and Kurogane grit his teeth. "When you were last here, Fuuma mentioned that the Liberalist techie is developing something to work around that issue. Are you using that to free the Hybrid?"

"Yeah." Kurogane narrowed his eyes at the Alpha, hoping the man wasn't going to ask for those nanites as recompense. As things were, Kurogane would be lucky if Tomoyo agreed to let him use those for the mage, considering how abruptly he'd stormed off.

"It's decided then," Touya clapped his hands once as he stood up with a grin. "I give you access to the mines during the tournament. In return, when you go to retrieve your brother and his friend, you bring back someone for me as well. Lupa is partnered with those two so it shouldn't be a problem to fetch her."

Masooma spoke up before Kurogane could decide on what to say. "There are limitations to the technology. What you're asking is—"

"I don't care," Touya interrupted, waving his hand in impatience. Turning to Kurogane and Subaru, he continued. "If you want access to the tunnels, you will do what I ask."

"And if I refuse?" Kurogane challenged.

Touya regarded him with a cool smile. "You're welcome to find some other way to get to the arena."

Kurogane considered his options, thinking back to what Subaru had said when he’d first brought the idea up. While there were ways to get in, the only one to do so undetected was through the mines. And the smiling bastard knew it. Kurogane turned on the full force of his glare at confident spark in the alpha’s eyes. "Fine. I'll get her for you."

"Brilliant!" Touya smiled a predatory smile. “Let’s leave dear Masooma to her research and discuss the details somewhere more appropriate, hmm? After all, it wouldn’t do if Syaoran were to suffer an unfortunate accident because you couldn’t control your temper, Kuanos."

Kurogane grit his teeth, picking up on the threat hidden in the alpha’s words. *As soon as this is over, I’m ripping this bastard to fucking shreds!* Instead of announcing that promise, however, he stepped to the side and bit out three words. “Lead the way.”

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Bia scrolled through the reports that her assistant had collected and sent through to her system. Cerellium production had gone up ever since that arrogant mutt had taken control of the mines. She supposed it was a good thing that he had. The mutt seemed to believe it had some sort of leverage over The Company with the way it used inhibitors on the rest of its followers, though Bia was getting free labor by cutting down on the cost of The Company's employees required to oversee the mines. Despite the initial hiccups, Bia's position within The Company had only improved with Touya's apparent takeover of the mines. The other directors on The Company’s board were impressed with her handling of the seemingly unprofitable situation into something cost-effective. That she had done so with an efficiency and decisiveness that belied her young age and lack of experience only meant that she had a better standing than her soft-hearted cousin.
"What game are you playing at now, Bia?"

Thinking of soft-hearted cousins... Bia glanced up, adapting a look of delight as she dismissed the reports. "Danish, how nice of you to drop by."

"Drop the theatrics," Danish snapped, storming into her office. "What gave you the right to approve this?" Danish slapped his palm on the table and the holographic display pulled up Akira’s proposal from last month, Bia's signature clearly visible in the document.

"I have all the rights to utilize The Company's resources as I see fit," Bia replied as she leaned back in her chair, dismissing the display before nodding for Danish to take a seat. She tapped the screen and brought up the latest reports submitted by Kyle and Akira and pushed them in his direction. "The mutt is useless as ever though. See for yourself."

Danish frowned, brown eyes scanning through documents, looking thunderous by the time he reached the end. Bia crossed her legs, biting back the urge to smile at the barely concealed anger in his words when he spoke. "You let them drug her?"

"Relax," Bia waved her hand. "It's not like anything came of it. According to Akira, the Hybrid is cursed with impotency."

"I don't give a damn about that. You allowed that son of a bitch to drug Maddy!"

This time, Bia did smile as she dismissed the documents. It was still so easy to rile him up whenever the mutt was concerned. "And this is why the board has been denying your requests to have Lupa’s control transferred to you. You're too emotionally invested in the Lupine."

"And you're a psychopath," Danish snapped, frustration warring with the anger in his eyes.

"Is that the best insult you could come up with?" Bia buffed her nails before throwing a sly grin at Danish. "I don't know why you refuse to accept the truth. You can't get her back. Even if Lupa went up for sale and you somehow managed to win the bid, dear little Maddy no longer exists. Accept it and move on. The board of directors can only ignore your behavior for so long."

"Is that a threat?" Danish gave her a narrow eyed glare.

"No, dear cousin." She shook her head, still smiling. This was too easy. "It's a warning. Change your views before you are forced to change." She turned her attention back to the reports she had to put away when Danish had come storming in. "Now, if that was all you wanted, I do have business ventures to oversee. And so do you, no?"

Instead of taking the hint, Danish leaned back in his chair as he gave her a considering look. "I wonder what the board of directors will have to say about your recent behavior."

"Meaning?" She quirked a brow.

"Don’t tell me you of all people forgot the rules about breeding gladiators," he said, casually picking at non-existent lint on his trousers. Bia narrowed her eyes. "You gave Akira your approval to use two of our most popular gladiators for breeding, breaking countless rules and setting a dangerous precedent."

Her expression soured. Danish smirked as he tapped the tabletop and copied the reports from Akira and Kyle to his portable console. "They’re not going to be very happy with you when they find out. Thank you for sharing these with me, by the way."
A pop up notification showed up on her console as she received the email addressed to the entire board of directors. She felt heat rise up her cheeks as she read the short message Danish had sent out with the email. The reports and her approval were in the attachments.

"I don't enjoy having to remind you of this repeatedly, dear cousin, so consider this your final warning. Leave Lupa alone." He gave her a cold smile. "Because the next time you try something like this, you will wish I had brought you before the board."

"What I do with Lupa and her team is my prerogative, Danish," she snapped.

"Not when you put The Company's profits at risk with your actions," Danish said as he stood up, pocketing his personal console. "Try not make another mistake like this, cousin. I'll see you at dinner tonight." With that, he walked out of her office, leaving Bia to fume.

An invite for an explanatory meeting with the rest of the board popped up in the display. Bia shoved the console away with a snarl. Glowering at the closed door, she leaned back in her chair. Ever since Lupa had been appropriated by The Company, Danish had been steadily becoming a bigger pain. *I suppose it's time to deal with this particular thorn.*

Unlocking her drawer, she withdrew a secure comm-device and scrolled through the list of contacts. Dialing a number, she brought it her ear.

"Hello?"

"Fuuma, I have a new assignment for you."

Chapter End Notes

Dun Dun Dunnn!!! Fuuma is a double agent. Did anyone see that coming? Despite what Bia told Lupa, Danish does care for his sister even if his hands are tied by bureaucracy. Any ideas on what Bia has in mind for him? Did you enjoy Kurogane and Touya’s fight? And what’s your opinion about Masooma being a badass? Drop me a comment and tell me what you think. :)
Crumbling

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains potential triggers

Bia's voice rang in her ears. "Did you really think he cared for you?"

Lupa flinched, doing her best to ignore the words as she curled tighter in her tiny cage. Sweat trickled down her skin, burning against her cracked lips. Something shifted in the darkness, and she whimpered, knowing what would come next.

"Poor little Maddy, still waiting for your big brother to come and rescue you."

She grit her teeth. "Shut up."

"Why? You really should know better by now." Naba's voice joined in with a cackle. "Sentiment, what a foolish thing to have."

"I told you to shut up," Lupa snapped, her surroundings lighting up in shades of gray as she partially transformed.

She was alone.

She could feel her heart thumping against her ribs, her stomach churning as her vision flickered between darkness and gray outlines. Dread settled in her gut as she realized that in a few weeks, she wouldn't even be able to transform her hands. And then they would find out, and she would be dragged into the Breeding Program.

"I wonder what's been keeping brother dear, don't you?" Kyle's chuckles pierced the silence. "What do you think will happen when the truth of your deeds comes out?"

"No..." Lupa gasped, eyes wide.

"Come now, Maddy," Bia crooned. "Denial doesn't become you."

"Oh! I know," Naba said in a nauseatingly cheerful tone. "What if it's been a ploy this whole time? Or maybe he's forgotten all about you."

Fear wrapped around her, digging into her chest like thorny vines. They were lying. Danish loved her. He was the only one who had ever cared for her. He wouldn't leave her here. "Leave me alone," she pleaded, the last of her defiance crumbling under the weight of her terror. Why did they keep coming back? She was already broken. There were a million pieces of her existence precariously pushed back together, but the fragments wouldn't hold forever. Sooner or later she would shatter and fall apart. So why did they keep prodding at her?

"You didn't answer her, Lupa." She ignored Kyle. Or tried to anyway. Her heart lurched and she felt the beginning of another crack in her being. What if—

"What if all this was just a ploy?" Bia finished what Lupa's treacherous mind had tentatively tried
"He loves me," Lupa insisted. It was the truth. She knew it from the bottom of the cold, shriveled thing that she called a heart. She knew it, just as she knew they weren't really there. "Danish is going to get me out of here. He promised. He asked me to stay strong for him…"

"Yes, he did, didn't he?" Kyle seemed to consider her words.

"And look at how proud you've been making him," Naba said. "Champion for three years in a row. I guess all those lessons with the Lupines Danish rescued from The Company did pay off. You're the baddest bitch of them all. The biggest monster of the lot."

Could that be why he— "No... I'm not listening to you." Lupa moaned, pressing down on her ears hard enough to hurt. The crack in her heart was spreading, splitting into two. "Go away."

"Why? Aren't you bored in here all by yourself?" Naba's laughter was sharp and cruel. "You've been stuck in here for what, four days now? Or has it been six? It really is hard to tell the time in here."

Lupa shook her head. She wasn't going to listen to the voices. She wasn't.

"I wonder how Berserker— wait, I'm sorry, you called him Fai that night. I wonder how Fai is doing. Tell me, how much did you enjoy spreading your legs for him, hmm? Were you worried he might hate you for what you took from him?"

Shame settled over her like a thick cloak. Lupa hunched her shoulders, curling into herself once more. "That wasn't me," she whispered.

"No? Are you going to blame the medication?" Akira decided to join her phantoms, voice as clinical as ever.

"Pathetic." Bia scoffed. "You can't even get a man in your bed without drugs."

"Crazy little Maddy. You were always a monster and a killer." Naba let out a high-pitched giggle. "I guess now we can add rapist to that list. But you have to admit you had fun, having him lust after you. Had he been in his senses, we both know he never would have looked your way twice. But oh," Naba gave a throaty moan and Lupa shuddered, "you loved it, didn't you, Maddy?"

The words hit like a punch, forcing the air from her lungs. The world froze. Suddenly, she was back in the darkened hallway, Fai pushing her into the wall, his fangs pressing against her throat. She was in his room, warm hands on her naked flesh, her nails raking against his skin and the heat and the want and moaningscreamingohpleasepleaseplease—

The need for oxygen reasserted itself. Lupa drew in a ragged gasp, once again trapped in the tiny cage. The air tasted foul against her tongue and she wanted to throw up. The fissures in her soul spread and branched. "No…"

"What do you mean no?" Naba's voice burned with outrage. "Remember how you screamed his name? Over and over and over? Begging for more. You were never such a slut with any of the trainers… But then again, the trainers at least agreed to it. I bet he hates you for what you did."

"It wasn't my fault." The cage was shrinking; she could feel the bars digging into her arms, her back. The room was burning. She couldn't breathe.

"Do you think he would have enjoyed killing you?" Kyle mused. "We all know his offer to take you
away from here was a lie."

"Just like Danish," Naba sang.

"No, leave me alone." Wave after crushing wave of panic washed over her.

"Are you still trying to deny the truth?" Bia added. "Danish has moved on to better things, Maddy."

"No." They had turned up the heat. They were going to burn her alive!

"He's accepted his position in the Board of Directors by my side."

"You're lying." Why was everything closing in? She had to get out…

"He's forgotten about you."

No, no, no… the cracks stretched outwards like spiders skittering on glass. "Liar! Let me out of here!

"No one is coming to save you."

"Shut up! Shut up! Leave me alone!" Her voice grew hoarse. Her throat burned, the taste of iron strong on her lips. Putrid worms crawled through her flesh, burning and decaying as pieces of her turned to dust.

"You're going to be a breeder~"

"Let me out!" Another fragment of her turned to ash and then another… She dug in a claw to pull out the worms but she was falling apart like shattered glass.

"I'll have you spend the rest of your life popping out new experiments for me every six months."

"No! Let me out! Leave me alone! Let me out!" she screamed, wrapping her disintegrating fists around the bars. There was light, bright and burning, turning her to ashes as needles bit into her neck and her blood turned to ice. Darkness leapt out of the light to snatch her, and the world faded away.

-0-

Fai spent six days in solitary confinement. On the seventh day, he was bound and led out of his cage. Manacles on his wrists, collar on his throat, and shackles around his ankles, all linked together by a long chain in the hands of a guard as Fai shuffled behind the man on bare feet. A couple doors down, another guard led a gaunt-faced Kamui in a similar manner. Did I destroy his nanites, too, Fai wondered, or was it just a precaution?

Kamui looked pale and half-starved, skin stretched taut over sharp cheekbones, eyes ringed by dark circles. Fai suspected he looked no better. Other than a slight stiffening of his shoulders, Kamui made no move to indicate that he'd noticed Fai's presence. They followed their respective guards in silence, stumbling to a halt when the men rounded a corner. The silence was broken by the sound of familiar growls that gave way to high-pitched giggling.

Two armed guards stood in the middle of the corridor, their attention fixed on the open door to their right. Chains rattled, trailed by the sound of feet dragging across the floor before two more guards appeared from inside the room, Lupa half-staggering, half-crawling after them. Next to him, Kamui inhaled sharply and Fai felt his breath catch in his throat.
Lupa looked feral.

Missing her glasses, her unkempt hair hanging around her face in thick clumps, Lupa gave a slow, rictus grin as her eyes landed on them. Dried blood crusted on her lips and chin, and filth streaked her skin, visible through her torn clothes except for her arms, where a mess of silvery scars was on full display.

"Hello, boys," Lupa sang, stumbling in their direction only to be yanked back by the multiple chains binding her. She glanced at her manacles in confusion before holding them up for show. "Oh... oops. I guess they don't want me to say hello. Sorry." She let out a drunken giggle. Sniffing the air, Fai could easily identify the stench of chemicals wafting off of her, underneath the stale tang of blood.

"You drugged h-her," Fai murmured in dawning horror, ignoring Kamui's scoff. "Why would you drug h-h-her?"

"Crazy mutt tried to off itself a couple of days ago," answered the guard holding Fai's leash. "Slashed its arms all the way to the bone so we had to drug it to keep it under control."

His heart sank as he watched Lupa continue to giggle. She'd wanted me to kill her...

"Shut up!" The guard on the right backhanded her and Lupa staggered into the wall. A snarl caught in Fai's throat, barely quelled by the sharp look Kamui shot him. The guard holding Fai shifted as Lupa pushed away from the wall. Her features partially transformed and she bared her canines, growling at the man.

"You shouldn't have done that." She took a step towards him, and the man stumbled back. Lupa stilled, watching him through narrowed eyes, like a wolf stalking its prey. Her lips peeled back in a savage grin as she cackled. It was unlike any sound Fai had heard from her before, madness shining bright in her eyes as she sang. "Now I'm going to have to kill you. Don't you know?" She paused, looking around at her audience, lowering her voice in a stage whisper. "I'm a monster. And a murderer. And a— No, no, I'm not telling you that one." She let out another undignified giggle before pretending to zip her lips.

"How much did you give her?" Kamui stared at Fai's guard in incredulity.

"Handler Kyle wants them in Prep within the hour," the man reminded the others, ignoring Kamui's query.

"Start moving," barked the man who had backhanded Lupa. "Unless you want to be muzzled."

And with that, the three were led through the maze of corridors to a communal shower room. It was identical to the one where Fai had been forcefully cleaned once before. Their chains were slid into three separate slots in the walls, Lupa shoved to Fai's right and Kamui to his left before the guards moved away ordering them to strip off their clothes.

Kamui glanced down at the manacles and muttered only loud enough for Fai to hear. "How do they expect us to get undressed?"

Fai, knowing from previous experience that it was best to do as ordered, started unbuttoning his shirt with a shrug. Better to save his energy for whatever awaited them in the prep room, he decided as hunger gnawed at his stomach.

Kamui gave an impatient growl before shredding through the old cotton with his claws. Fai pulled off his pants but kept the boxers on while Kamui simply crossed his arms and scowled at the
guards, still in the threadbare pants. Lupa fidgeted in place, her hands fisted around the hem of her shirt as her gaze darted all over the room. She reminded him of an injured snow leopard he'd once encountered in Ceres, hackles raised, eyes wild with fear and anger.

The guard near the door leered and Lupa seemed to shrink back. "What's the matter, Mutt? Afraid to show a little skin?" The other guards guffawed, slapping each other on the back while jeering her to give them a show.

"Why don't you come a little closer and I'll show you a little skin." Lupa bared her teeth and stood up with as much dignity as her unsteady legs could provide. "After I tear it from your fucking face!"

"Have it your way, bitch," the man growled before nodding at his companions. A jet of frigid, high-pressured water slammed into Fai, knocking the breath from his lungs. Being hosed down wasn't any less humiliating the second time around. It didn't help that after being half-starved for over a week, he could barely stay upright under the pressure. Lupa, in her drug-addled state, crashed into the tiles with a high-pitched shriek. She screamed profanities at the guards though half her words were drowned out by the water. Only the fact that he was being pressed into the tiles behind him kept Fai upright. As soon as the water cut off, he found himself sliding to the floor.

On his other side, Kamui seemed to be staying on his feet through sheer stubbornness alone, though Fai could see the way he shivered. Lupa was on all fours, water dripping from hair that hung around her head like coiled snakes. She trembled badly, her lips rapidly turning blue from the cold. He tried not to think of the effect all the abuse would be having on the babies.

A guard threw a bar of harsh smelling soap at them and nodded at toward the tiled panels concealing the showerheads behind them. "Clean yourselves up. And make sure to wash your hair unless you want it all hacked off again."

"Maybe we should shear it all off anyway," muttered the one with the hose. "They've probably got a hoard of lice living in those nests."

Gritting his teeth, Fai gave a subtle twitch of his fingers to send a series of invisible hexes at the guards as Kamui bent to pick up the soap. It was reckless and petty and a wasteful use of his magic, but it wasn't like he could use it to get rid of nanites anymore. He was stuck, with no clever solution for his problems. Besides, even if the guards somehow managed to link the sudden onset of bald spots back to him, he would be out of their reach in two days.

Accepting the bar from Kamui, he scrubbed at his scalp, ignoring the stinging sensation on his skin. There wasn't any use in complaining after all. He handed it over to Lupa but she let it drop to the tiles as she used her bare hands to rub her skin. The cold water appeared to have broken through the drug haze somewhat. She wasn't giggling anymore, and there was a spark of fury in her eyes when she met his gaze. The water from the showers was closer to room temperature, but the guards cut it off much quicker than Fai would have liked. Two of the guards walked over, one with a set of towels and robes in his arms while the other spun a set of metal keys in a ring around his finger. He also carried a long black rod with three metal prongs at the end. Stopping three feet away, the man pointed the rod in their direction and pressed a silver button in its side. It barely stung as a tiny metallic device embedded in Fai's bicep. Glancing at his companions he noticed that both Lupa and Kamui sported similar accessories.

"And what does this do?" Fai asked, anger simmering in his chest as the man gestured for him to hold out his wrists.

"Keeps you lot in your place." He scowled, unlocking Fai's shackles and shoving a set of robes
against his chest before moving on to Kamui, wordlessly repeating the same process. "Try anything and you'll be wishing your mother had never conceived you. Now shut up and change into that."

The guard and his companion leered as they came to a halt before Lupa. "Are you going to be a good little bitch or are you going to make this fun?"

Lupa spat in his face, letting out a shriek of pain when the device in her arm lit up and her body spasmed. Fai could hear the crackle of electricity from where he stood, and his anger rose up to a boil. No!

Moving between the guard and Lupa, he grabbed hold of the rod before it could smash into Lupa's face. Metal crunched beneath his fingers as Fai wrenched the device from the guard's hand, before spinning it around like a baton to slam it into the man's gut. Spittle flew from the guard's mouth, his eyes bulging as he flew through the air to land across the tiled floor. He did not get up again.

Fangs and claws bared, Fai turned to the one bearing the robes and the man stumbled back, fumbling for something in his pockets.

"You shouldn't have done that," Fai hissed, advancing on the guard. Raising a clawed finger, he traced out the runes for a time-delayed, lethal hex, splitting the curse into two identical chains that shot toward the pair of guards, one whimpering and the other unmoving. The ropes of azure magic wrapped around their necks like nooses before sinking into skin, leaving behind no trace. The one still awake grinned in triumph as he finally found what he had been searching for and brandished a black remote control.

Electricity surged outwards from the device in his arm. Fai felt his body lock in place. He was distantly aware of the sounds of screaming, though he didn't immediately realize that he wasn't the only one, They're punishing us all was the last clear thought he had as the golden hues in his vision cut back to the dreary white and grey, spots of darkness dancing in between. Despair clawed its way up his chest as the burning, freezing fire danced across his veins. If he was in such a state, what was happening to the others? To the babies?

Magic, wild and uncontrolled, gushed upwards from its shallow pool of reserves left inside him, mingling with the fire already in his blood. Pressure built up in his head, attacking the tiny foreign thing in his brain, and it was too much, and he couldn't breathe…

A voice cut through the crackling pain, sharp and demanding and the arcs of electricity lancing across his nerves cut off. Fai sagged to the floor, barely even feeling it as Lupa crashed on top of him.

"Is there a problem here?"

The world was fuzzy around the edges and yet, despite the sharp whistling in her ears, Lupa had no trouble hearing that unwelcome voice, nor did she miss the impatient scowl on its owner face as her handler walked inside. The chilly floor beneath her was lumpy and it was only when it shifted that she realized she was lying atop her teammate. Lifting her head, she found herself staring into Fai's eyes. Such a pretty blue, a tiny voice chirped in her head as she squinted at him. For the first time, she had no trouble acknowledging that he was rather pretty too. And he did make for a rather comfortable pillow.

"Why is Lupa still in wet clothes?" Kyle's tone was dangerously soft. Lupa tried to focus on him
instead.

"The mutt refused to take them off, Handler." As if she would ever put herself on display for a lecherous piece of crap.

"And you decided to help it out of them?" Kyle quirked a brow at the man. "Need I remind you of the rules in place for my prized competitor, Benjamin?"

"N-No, Handler Kyle," Benjamin stuttered, trying to shove the remote back in his pocket. It only took an unimpressed look from Kyle for the guard to sullenly hand it over.

"Go on, then." Kyle pocketed the device and gestured to where Lupa was still sprawled on top of her teammate. "Quit wasting my time and help it up."

The moment Benjamin's hand rested on her arm, Lupa lashed out with a claw that the guard barely managed to dodge. "Fuck off!"

"Would you like to parade through the hallways in those dripping clothes, Lupa?" Kyle inquired as he let his gaze roam over her body, a look of cruel amusement on his face as continued. "Or perhaps you'd prefer it in the nude?"

"Fuck you!" She took a stumbling step in his direction, but the world swayed and she barely managed to stay upright.

Kyle seemed to consider her words for a moment before shaking his head. "No, I think your Hybrid might get jealous. And then what would your fans say?"

Lupa stiffened, her heartbeat stuttering at hidden meaning behind his words. He wants me to go public with this? Gritting her teeth, Lupa snatched the robe and pulled it on top of her dripping clothes as dread replaced the warm, giddy haze left by the remnants from the drugs. Kyle's only reaction was to give her a bland smile before he turned and walked away, leaving the guards to herd the three of them to the prep room where a host of stylists descended upon them.

The electric shock and adrenaline had flushed nearly all the drugs from her system, leaving her comparatively clearheaded. Her mind was still a mess, and there was that niggling fear of what would become of her when they found out she was pregnant, but she was able to push it aside. Having been through the process before, Lupa knew better than to protest the plethora of creams, makeup, and styling gels, though from the looks of things her teammates certainly found the ordeal invasive. Instead of protesting the treatment, she leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes, content for a moment to pretend that she was somewhere else.

She conjured up a scene from her childhood, wearing a dress of delicate laces and ribbons while her personal stylist fussed about her with makeup and styling tools. That was a time when she'd still been human as far as anyone else was concerned, a time before she'd trusted a backstabbing bitch with her secret. A time when she was more than a thing to be owned, with a home and a family willing to protect her. And then, like an idiot, she'd let her 'best friend' in on the secret, not knowing that Naba would betray her trust and sell her out for money and power.

Memories of the past brought with them a rush of anger bubbling up in her veins that made her grit her teeth. Alarmed, she quickly changed the direction of her thoughts, choosing to focus on Kyle's seemingly innocuous words. He wanted her to go public her relationship with Berserker. But of course it couldn't be so simple as to admit that she had forced herself on him. No. Kyle wouldn't want her to implicate him or his co-conspirators. Did he want her to hint that there was something going between her and Fai? Or perhaps play the part of a lovesick fool? But no… that would never
work with the persona the world knew her by.

Lupa frowned in thought and was immediately admonished by the artist working on her eyes to stop. Biting back an annoyed growl, she complied, as she decided on a course of action. If she were to do what Kyle had asked of her, she'd choose the one that would keep her and the unborn twins out of Akira's hands even if the entire truth was exposed.

If she couldn't rely on her brother to gain her freedom, she would just have to snatch it on her own.
Kurogane walked down the darkening street, watching the people hurrying down the streets from behind his sunglasses. The cold wind whipped his shaggy hair around his face and he hunched his shoulders to hide behind the upturned collar of his trench coat though no one spared him any mind as they hurried off doing whatever it was they were doing. That suited Kurogane just fine. It wasn't that he could feel the biting wind but it served as a good cover. The smog-filled skies above him rumbled as thunder rolled over the city, flashes of lightning whiting out the holo-screens hovering high above his head as they played the opening credits for the gladiator interviews. The hype surrounding the annual gladiator tournament sugar-coated the event as something everyone ought to be proud of, concealing the ugly truth that it was nothing more than a glorified death sentence for most of the participants.

Turning a street corner, Kurogane spotted the bar that was his destination and hurried his pace. Thick, stinging droplets of sludge-like rain began to patter against the asphalt just as he ducked under the awning and walked through the swinging glass door. The bar was cramped and dirty, just like every other place in that sector, the air thick with the stench of smoke and alcohol and the sound of raucous laughter mingled with the ongoing commentary from a holo-screen display on the back wall.

"- in what I'm sure will be quite an exciting round of the program."

"I'm sure it will be, Primera. Our fans are quite excited about the lineup this year."

Breathing shallowly, Kurogane walked deeper into the bar, scanning the tables to ensure that he was the first to arrive.

"Yes, not only is the crowd favorite La Lupa back for another round, but she has two very handsome partners in Strigoi and Berserker. Of course, let's not discount the team headed by Pyro, including Fullmetal and Envy."

Walking over to the counter, he ordered himself a drink and turned back around to keep an eye on the doorway. The rain had begun to pour in earnest, flashes of lightning lighting up the otherwise darkened world outside as the streets quickly emptied.

"The competition is close between Pyro and Lupa's teams this year. As you can see from the statistics showing up on screen now, both teams have excellent synergy in terms of their abilities. Being so well-matched, theirs will make for an exciting battle."

After accepting the payment, the bartender slid a couple of bottles in his direction, and Kurogane made his way to an empty table in the back. He chose a seat that let him keep both the entrance and the holo-screen showcasing various gladiators and their statistics, in view as he settled in to wait.

"And that concludes today's summary of the gladiator statistics. Detailed overviews of the competing gladiators will be made available on the Piffle Princess and The Company websites after tonight's interviews."

Kurogane cracked open the top of his drink and brought the bottle to his lips, listening to the commentators drone on with half an ear.
"-and now we will begin our finalist interviews. Primera, would you like to do the honors?"

"I would love to, Shougo. Our first trio for the evening is La Lupa, Strigoi, and Berserker!" It wasn't until Primera announced the names that Kurogane turned to give the holo-screen his full attention. "Here they come, and oh—would you look at that dress? Lupa, darling, you look stunning!"

It took him a moment to identify the smiling woman that stepped into the camera's view as Lupa. Dressed in a shimmering crimson gown with her hair piled on top of her head in elegant curls, the picture of grace and sophistication was worlds away from the savage thing he'd become used to seeing during the tournament matches. A multitude of ruby studded clips glittered in her hair as she took her place in the interviewee's chair and waved at the camera.

Kamui stepped in view next, wearing a dark velvet suit matched with a pale shirt and an equally pale neck tie, his face clear of all expression as he sat down. Fai walked in last, his outfit closer to what he had preferred in Infinity. But it was that stupid grin he wore that sent Kurogane's heart racing. That hateful mask was back and the sight of it made something in his chest twist painfully.

Primera giggled when the mage stopped to kiss the back of her hand before taking his seat, which happened to be the one next to Lupa.

"So, Berserker," Primera spoke, a faint flush dusting her cheeks as she focused her attention on the mage, "this is going to be your first annual event. Tell me, are you feeling nervous at all?"

"With Strigoi and Lupa for teammates, it's hard to feel anything but excitement." A fond look at said teammates accompanied the mage's smooth words. Kurogane tasted bile in the back of his throat. Damn that idiot... Not even watching the blond fight for his life had sickened him this much. Looking at him now, it was as though the man Kurogane had come to trust with his life was once more lost behind the mask of the lying bastard he'd first met at Yuuko’s shop. Just what the hell were The Company assholes doing to the mage in there?

Kurogane took a swig of the drink, feeling the liquid burn its way down his throat.

"What about you, Strigoi? We've all noticed that the friction between you and your fellow Vampirosa. Are you happy with Berserker watching your back in the arena?"

"Berserker wouldn't be much of a useful teammate if I couldn't even trust him to watch my back." Kamui answered in a monotone, face still void of emotion.

"I hope you didn't have to wait too long." The cultured accent and musical lilt to the words sounded wrong to his ears in that voice but he turned his focus on the blond seated across from him. Kurogane nearly swore at having let down his guard enough to not notice the man's arrival. Yuui lowered the crimson scarf concealing half of his face to flash him a grin before gesturing for one of the servers to come and take his order.

"So, Lupa, darling, tell me, is it true that you have been letting your teammates feed from you?"

"What did you want to see me for?" Kurogane demanded.

"Let's have a drink or two first, Mr. Kuanos," Yuui replied before leaning in closer as he lowered his voice. "Or should it be Mr. Kurogane?" Kurogane stiffened and the man let out a laugh. "Relax, acting suspicious will draw unwanted attention, mate."

"Not the both of them, no."
"Oh my, do tell me more. Are you two together now?"

"What do you want?" Kurogane snapped, the words coming out with more than a hint of a growl.

"Just to talk," Yuui replied easily as he leaned back in his chair. The server seemed to have picked up on the anger radiating from Kurogane as he nervously set down the drinks and scurried away.

"You want to know if we're sleeping together." Lupa let out a husky laugh. "You could say that the rumors are true."

Yuui pushed one of the drinks in Kurogane's direction before picking up the other and taking a slow sip of the amber liquid. "Ah, that is some good alcohol."

Kurogane glowered.

Yuui smiled before nodding towards the holo-screen that currently showed Fai and Primera. "He's a friend of yours, is he not?"

"How did it start between the two of you?" Primera's eyes were glittering at the promise of juicy gossip as she directed her question at Fai.

"I'm not going to repeat myself again," Kurogane growled, focusing solely on his unwanted companion. Yuui pouted and for a heartbeat, Kurogane could almost pretend it was the mage sitting across from him. But then the blond was reaching back for his drink with a sly grin and the moment was broken.

"I met another friend of yours," Yuui said after his glass was half-empty. "A little white thing."

"Well, I… We—"

Someone who sounded like the mage was stuttering something far away, but Kurogane couldn't bring himself to pay attention past the rushing of blood in his eardrums. "Did you hand over the manju to those bastards?"

"Someone higher up decided they wanted little hybrid babies so they drugged me and told me to go fuck Berserker."

"I'm joking. I mean, honestly, that sort of thing couldn't happen without a Director's explicit approval."

The anger curling in his stomach reared its head as the noise in the bar gave way to silence and the world around him narrowed down to two pinpricks focused on the vexing blond. Bloodlust tickled at the back of his throat demanding a taste of iron and he growled.

"Why in the world would I do that to Mokona?" The blond seemed to be genuinely puzzled before realization sparked in those awfully familiar blue eyes. "Oh, I see. You thought I would hand over a unique Unnatural and turn in a big profit. I must have made a very poor first impression on you, for you to think so lowly of me, Mr. Kurogane."

"Oh…" Primera gave an uneasy laugh, her skin appearing pale in the harsh camera lights. "That was—"

"Don't use that name," Kurogane snapped even though his burning anger slowly settled down at the idea of reuniting with the dimension hopper. He'd been by himself for too damn long. "Where is the manju?"

"In poor taste? My apologies," Lupa said as she leaned completely against Fai's arm, resting her
head against his shoulder with a smile. "You could say the attraction had always been there, but it took me a while to see behind the whole Berserker persona, you know?"

"Mokona is safe." Yuui smiled but even that looked so wrong on that face. "And recovering. I found the little guy after it had an unfortunate encounter with a pack of wild dogs."

"I see. Ahem, well, moving on to you now, Strigoi: how has your experience been so far, being a part of the team of a three time returning champion?"

"Quite extraordinary."

"A Vampirosa of few words," Primera said, her smile still strained as she turned back to Fai. "How about—"

"Why didn't you bring it here with you?"

"Are you really not going to drink that?" Yuui said instead, jerking his head towards Kurogane's untouched drink. Shrugging at Kurogane's glare, the blond picked up the glass and took a sip. Leaning back in his seat with that stupid looking grin, he finally answered. "I felt it would be safer to reunite the two of you someplace a little more private."

"So, Lupa, I don't know if Handler Kyle has informed you of this, but Director Danish Shah was gravely injured in an attempt on his life last night. From the initial assessment of the crime scene, it appears to have been staged by the Liberalists. Would you like to share your thoughts on that given your history with the Director?"

"Now isn't that interesting?" Yuui nodded at the holo-screen before taking another slow sip of his drink. "If you ask me, the attack was probably arranged by one of the other directors and made to look like it was a bunch of radical Liberalists behind it. But exposing Lupa to that tiny tidbit on live television? That poor thing. I almost feel sorry for her."

Kurogane had a feeling Yuui wouldn't be budging from the bar until he wanted to and he had to grit his teeth at having to cater to the bastard’s whims until he could reunite with the manju. "Why?"

"I do wish the Director a speedy recovery," Lupa smiled at the camera before turning back to Primera. "Although I'm not sure why you felt the need to ask my opinion on the matter. My history, as you've put it, is better left forgotten. Everything else has been, after all."

"Director Shah is her older brother," Yuui replied as he drained the glass and set it back on the table before motioning for the server to bring their bill, "and probably the only one in her family who cared about her anymore. Obviously, the sentiment is one sided if Lupa’s response is anything to go by…"

Kurogane glanced at the display to study Lupa’s face and found himself unable to tell if the indifference was just an act or truly what the Lupine felt. Based on what Touya had shared with him, Kurogane hadn’t even known that she had any family other than the Alpha. Apparently she was related to someone inside The Company. Although if that was the case, why the hell was she being forced to fight? The smile on Lupa’s face was fixed, not quite reaching her eyes so obviously that was a front but was she pissed off or did she simply not give a damn? It was only by chance that he caught the flash of bone white knuckles of her clenched fists as she shifted that Kurogane realized she was not as unaffected by the news as she was pretending to be.

"—to vote for Team Lupa." Primera kept jabbering on as a series of numbers and text appeared at the bottom of the display. "The number currently displaying on your screens will be open for
voting right after the show, and the lines will remain open for the next twenty four hours. And please remember that the total number of votes will determine what opening advantages will be granted to your favorite team in the arena. So vote as many times as you can to ensure that our favorites have the most advantages.”

Yuui paid the server and stood up, pulling up the scarf to conceal his face once more. "Let's go. I promised Mokona we'd be back in an hour."

Kurogane followed suit, walking out into the sludge-like rain just as the next team appeared on screen for their round of interviews.

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Mokona paced along the windowsill, pausing every now and then to stick its head to the glass and squint at the street below. Yuui had left nearly two hours ago, claiming he was meeting with Kurogane to let him know where Mokona was. It wasn't that Mokona didn't trust his new friend's word, but Yuui had lied to Mokona before. Yuui's second deal with Yuuko had gone smoothly, and he'd received a new set of transforming nanites from a contact of Yuuko's in Piffle World.

Unlike the stolen experimental nanites he'd been using before, these wouldn't kill him, and they didn't even need him to drink anything nasty to trigger a change. Even more than that, he could program a wide variety of transformations into the nanites instead of having only three. The price for the upgraded nanites had been a few more magical artifacts that just happened to already be in Yuui's possession, as well as a promise that Mokona and Kurogane would be reunited within the next couple of days.

A flash of lightning lit up the world outside and for a moment, Mokona saw its own reflection staring back at it in the sludge-streaked glass. Yuuko had sent through a special medicine for Mokona to help it heal quicker. The ointment had burned when Yuui had first applied it, but by now Mokona's bitten off arm had nearly finished re-growing to full size.

The doorknob jingled and Mokona quickly turned on its feet, bounding across the living room to reach the entrance just as the door cracked open. "You're back!"

"Hello, little friend," Yuui greeted as he entered the apartment, followed by a dark-haired man who looked nothing like Kurogane. Mokona took a step back in fear. All the doubts Mokona had been keeping at bay since Yuui had left surged to the fore. Had Yuui lied about going to fetch Kurogane? But that was supposed to be part of Yuui's payment to Yuuko. How could—

"Manju?"

Mokona felt its eyes widen as he took in the stranger in the doorway. The face and the hair and even the eyes were wrong, but now that Mokona focused, it could feel that familiar spark that helped it identify its companions coming from the man in front of it. So Mokona launched off the floor and straight onto the man's shoulder. "Kurogane!"

The large hand resting on Mokona as it nuzzled the man's neck carried with it a familiar comfort, erasing any doubts that that this wasn't Kurogane. "Mokona has been so worried! Mokona couldn't find anyone and then Mokona was attacked by wild dogs and then Yuui found Mokona." The words spilled out on their own and Mokona found itself retelling everything that it had encountered since landing in Cavahall to Kurogane, keeping its face buried in the ninja's neck. Kurogane moved further into the apartment and sat down as Yuui made a quiet announcement about bringing food.

Once finished with its tale, Mokona withdrew and hopped to the coffee table, looking up at
Kurogane started to speak, then shut his mouth as he glowered at something behind Mokona. Mokona looked back to see Yuui standing behind it with a tray bearing tea and sandwiches. "I'll tell you later," Kurogane said in the end as Yuui set down the tray and held out a mug of dark steaming liquid for Kurogane to take.

"Don't worry, I haven't poisoned anything." Yuui smiled when Kurogane appeared to hesitate. "Killing you would defeat the purpose of reuniting you with Mokona here. Besides, I'm interested in seeing Fai out of The Company's clutches myself."

Mokona grabbed a sandwich from the plate and quickly nibbled through the bread before reaching for a second helping. Kurogane seemed to make up his mind about the food as he accepted the tea. "Why?"

"He might not be the same as the one who died in this world," Yuui replied with a shrug. He grabbed the other mug and settled into his usual armchair, "but Fai is my twin brother." Mokona felt Kurogane tense at Yuui's nonchalant manner though Mokona didn't think he was lying. It might not be the only reason that Yuui had for wanting Fai free but Mokona could pick at the hint of truth underlying Yuui's words.

Mokona didn't miss how Kurogane refused to drink the tea until Yuui had had some for himself first. Yuui continued to smile, taking a delicate bite of his own sandwich before he spoke again. "I would like to help you with the rescue attempt."

"How exactly are you planning on doing that?" Kurogane was his usual rude self, and if Fai were there, Mokona was certain he would have said something. But Fai was trapped with The Company and Mokona didn't even need to engage one of its secret techniques to know the extent of Kurogane's worry.

"I have resources and useful connections," Yuui replied with another shrug. "Favors I could call in if required. I am aware that you have left the Liberalists. If you need a place to stay, I have a safe house that's free, and Mokona is more than welcome to stay here with me for the duration of your mission."

Mokona thought Yuui's offer sounded quite reasonable, but Kurogane chose not to speak as he finished the tea and grabbed a sandwich. His face gave nothing away as he started eating, staring at Yuui for long enough to even make Mokona feel a little uncomfortable. After nearly an eternity, Kurogane grunted and reached out, palm facing up for Mokona to climb on, shifting it to his shoulder before standing up.

"It's a tempting offer but I don't trust you," Kurogane said in the end as he moved towards the apartment's exit. "I've got a place to stay, and I'm taking the meatbun with me. I'll let the mage know about you when I meet him, and if he wants to meet you that will be his decision."

With those words, he strode out of the apartment. Mokona scrambled to hide in an inner pocket of his jacket, trying not to feel guilty at the flash of sorrow on Yuui's face just before the door swung shut behind them.
The long awaited reunion between Kurogane and Mokona is here at last. And for once, instead of being separated again, Kurogane gets to take his companion with him (poor Syaoran is in no state to be moved for the foreseeable future unfortunately)
It's been quite a while and I have some big news to share. I am now the proud mother to an adorable five month old daughter. Which is exhausting work and barely leaves me with any time to write let alone get the chores done around the house. So updates will be on the slower side but we're nearing the end game now ;) ;) So um, enjoy the new chapter and don't forget to drop me a review at the end as reviews feed the plot bunnies and help me stay motivated to write faster.

Syaoran hovered in the spaces between dimensions, a fraying rope tethering his soul and keeping him from falling. Swaying between life and death, he should have panicked, but here in the in-between, far from pain, there was no room for fear, no room for worry or uncertainty. Nothing and no one could reach him here where nothing existed, and at last he was... at peace.

A bell toll echoed through the worlds, rippling across the planes of reality, shifting through time like curtains billowing in a midnight breeze. The spiderweb cracks widened outwards, touching all to come and all that is and all that was. The voiceless scream from the end of existence brushed against the leaf falling to the ground beneath the autumn sky, the swelling waves rolling across the sparkling sands, the icy caves and deadly valleys, all across the howling skies and the blazing stars. The rope frayed a little further and past, present, future — everything felt that ever was, is, and will be— felt the oncoming tempest and shuddered in trepidation.

Syaoran's body turned to ash in his arms, drifting into the snow swirling around Fai. Voice caught in his throat, Fai reached for the ashes with frozen fingers as the storm turned into a blizzard. A gust of sakura petals blew in from behind him, ripping through the Valley of Sinners around him as his surroundings morphed. Fai shivered as a towering wall of ice rose before him, cutting off his path to the mountainside of Castle Ruval. The wind blew harder as the sakura petals gathered on the other side of the wall taking the form of a familiar girl.

Princess Sakura had appeared for a second time to drive away his nightmare. He could tell that she wasn’t a part of his dream. She was truly there. He reached for the shallow pool of magic within him, his heart sinking with dread when it was too sluggish to respond. Slowly, like wading through molasses, he coaxed it to the surface, focusing on taking down the icy barrier separating him from the princess. He needed to tell her that Syaoran was still alive. His actions hadn't led to the boy's death. If she could get in touch with Kurogane and pass along the message, maybe he could get Syaoran out of Cavahall.

His magic splashed against the ice wall, barely scratching the barrier as Sakura mimicked him and attacked it from the other side. A crack appeared in the ice on their third coordinated attack, but before they could progress any further, their surroundings began to fall away as black, tarry substance erupted from the ice wall. Sakura's fingers scrabbled against the frozen ground as the tar-like substance dragged her into the darkness. That was the last thing he saw before it swallowed him too.
Fai awoke with a start, the scream from his half-remembered nightmare slipping back down his throat as he breathed deeply to calm himself. Something prickled at the back of his mind, and for a moment he wondered if it was just the lingering feelings from his dream. But the feeling only grew stronger with each successive beat of his heart, and in a moment that contained eternity, Fai realized it for what it was.

Lupa...

Pushing off the bedcovers, Fai hopped to his feet and raced out of his nicely furnished bedroom. The door slid open with a barely audible hiss, and he padded across the tiny hallway. After their week long stint in solitary confinement, Fai had noticed a change in Lupa's behavior. Though she had never been one of the most mentally stable Unnaturals in The Company's captivity, he'd chalked it up to a side-effect of the drugs she might have been given. But her behavior had only worsened ever since Primera had let slip that Director Danish was comatose. Worried about what she might do, Fai had set up a discreet ward around Lupa's doorway to alert him if she tried to leave.

Lupa's fragile mask of control had barely stayed together during the interview, and the way she had meekly endured Kyle's rant about going off script and implicating multiple employees of The Company for illegal experimentation had only worsened Fai's worry for the Lupine. It was as if the fire that always burned so brightly in her spirit had gone out entirely. She hadn't even batted an eye when they'd been informed that thanks to her stunt, their team would be beginning the final tournament with a handicap. That more than anything made Fai worry she was planning on doing something reckless.

His fears were confirmed when he reached the entrance hall. Lupa stood before the open archway that led into the corridor outside of their shared apartment, where the range limiters on their explosive nanites no longer functioned. With her hands clenched into trembling fists by her side, he didn't need to see the look on her face to know what she was thinking, didn't need to see the way she took a deep breath to steel herself to realize what she intended to do, didn't need to see her take her first step toward the threshold to cast a barrier spell across the archway. Lupa froze when the shimmering blue blockade formed in her path before she whirled around to glower at Fai. Lips peeled back to expose her canines, she barked three words. "Take it down."

"No."

"Take the damn thing down, Leech."

"No."

Lupa's face twisted through an array of emotions: frustration then fear, then fury. Fai braced himself for violence as her shoulders shook, but Lupa only gave a wordless snarl and spun back around to slam her fist into the barrier. The sound of flesh meeting his shield reverberated in his bones, and though his magic held strong, he knew she must have injured her hand with the force of the blow. Undeterred, she smashed her other hand, and when that yielded the same result, she lashed out with her right leg. And then again with her left. Uncaring of the damage she did to her own body, she continued her assault on the barrier Fai had erected, screaming all the while. "Take it down! Take it the fuck down!"

Knowing better than to get in range of her deadly claws, he could only watch as she fell apart. Her angry snarls echoed deep within his bones, building up in him something cold and ugly and painful. His mouth was dry, filled with sand that pushed against the lump in his throat, squeezing at the vice gripping his heart as Lupa shrieked and yelled and broke her knuckles against the blockade he had erected. He winced at the sound of cracking bones as she continued her relentless assault, as
though she could force her way past his magic if she kept hitting it long enough. He ached, wishing for something he could do to make it better yet knowing he had nothing to offer.

*But that's not true is it? There is something that you can offer.*

The sudden realization left him feeling so cold that it burned. It was as though the ice and snow from his nightmares had stolen into reality. He shivered, feeling the cold creeping across his skin like frost as Lupa lost control of her transformation and collapsed against the barrier. She screamed, the sound scraped raw and twisted beyond speech and human sound. It was a sob, a snarl, one part fury, one part fear.

Exhausted, she slid down to the floor in a limbless heap, her body shaking with ragged gasps as she broke down, and finally, Fai found himself able to move. As he made his way across the room to her side, he passed by Kamui's room and heard the younger vampire shuffling about inside, no doubt having awoken by the racket, but thankfully he did not appear in the hallway. It would be better not to have an audience for what he was about to do.

As he crouched next to Lupa, he could see himself from a lifetime ago reflected in the broken woman before him, and it was as pity and empathy bubbled up in Fai’s chest that the ice in his veins finally thawed. Acid Tokyo was less than a decade in the past for him and yet, looking at Lupa crumpled on the floor, he knew what she was going through. She was trapped in an impossible situation, where the only way out that she could see was by ending her life. She was scared and alone just like him back then. Sure, she didn't have the threat of killing someone she cared about looming over head to save someone else that she loved but dying certainly seemed like the only way to end all her troubles now that her brother was no longer able to buy her freedom. And… finding himself in that unenviable position, he also knew what Kurogane must have felt back then. *I'll have to apologize to Kuro-chi for being so difficult about saving my life.*

"L-Lupa, l-listen to me," he began and found himself being ignored. Holding back a sigh, he tried a slightly different approach. "Madiha, I know what you're going through." She went rigid. How long had it been since she'd heard her name spoken without mocking? Since before her captivity? Fai hesitated before reaching out to place his hand on her shoulder. "I've been in the same position as you and—"

"I doubt that," she sneered and shrugged off his touch. Her face was drawn in exhaustion when she glared at him, the spark of rebellion in her bloodshot eyes replaced by the hollowness of defeat.

"What?"

"Were you in the same *position* as me?" She leered, but even that action rang of emptiness.

"I meant about wanting to die," he answered, surprising Lupa with his admission long enough to grab hold of her forearm. Bringing it close, he pushed back her sleeve and started tracing out a series of runes across the bright, silver scars on her flesh. "I will make you the same promise that my friend made to me. If you want to die that badly, I'll h-help you do it, but…" Holding her gaze, he trailed off.

"But?" she whispered, and the word was breathless and hopeful and fearful all at once.

"But," he repeated, staring into her eyes even as he continued laying down the runes for his spell, "until a point comes when all h-hope is l-l-lost, I need you to promise me that you will l-l-live."

"Yeah, right," Lupa—no, *Madiha*—scoffed as she looked away.
If only Kuro-puu could see me now… "I mean it," he told her, firmly. "Starting tomorrow, the odds will be stacked against us. I can figure out something to get us out of here, but I can't be worried about trying to protect you from yourself at the same time."

"And what if you can't 'figure out something to get us out'?" she challenged just as Fai finished off the spell with a flourish. The glowing runes sunk into her flesh, slowly fading away to leave behind only the silver scars on her skin, though he could still feel the incantation there, ready to receive its deadly trigger.

"If I can't get us out, I will activate the spell I just cast."

"Well?" Madiha all but snapped. "Don't kill me with suspense. What does it do?"

"It's a curse to stop your heart," he said, ignoring the cold squeezing sensation in his chest at those words. The spell would not just end Madiha's life. It would kill the twins along with her, so even if they ended up recaptured, Akira would have no hope of retrieving live specimens for her depravities.

She let out a tiny 'oh' of understanding, glancing down to where his fingers rested against her skin. She reached out with her free hand and grabbed hold of his, twining their fingers together before she looked up again. She nodded and squeeze his fingers. "Thank you."

"You have my word. I won't let anyone turn you into an experiment," he said in earnest. "After all, it's the least I can do for landing us in this position in the first place."

"It's not your fault." She shook her head. "If anything, the blame for all this lies with me. I'm the one who drugged you and… and r-raped— I'm so sorry for forcing you to—"

"You were drugged as well," Fai cut her off. "I could blame you, but you're just as much of a victim as I am. Blaming yourself for what happened is not going to help."

Her teeth flashed, too swift and pained for it to be a true smile. "Sounds like you speak from experience." Her voice came out too brittle for it to be a joke, and she sighed. "This is so fucked up. I didn't… I never wanted this, and you're sure as hell didn't want this." She nodded to her stomach before hunching her shoulders, almost as though she was preparing for a blow to come her way.

"You're r-right. I didn't," Fai admitted and she flinched, pulling her hand away from his grasp only for Fai to tighten his hold as he continued. "But you didn't either. Neither of us wanted this but this h-how things are now. Worrying about the past won't help us."

"No, I suppose it won't." A shallow grin pulled at her lips, tinged with bitterness. Madiha took a shaky breath and let it out, but on the next inhale, she gathered herself back up. Her shoulders dropped as she exhaled, and when she met his gaze there was a hint of a spark in her eyes, a fire, that Fai recognized. "For what it's worth, I truly am sorry… Fai."

He didn't know who ultimately closed the distance between them, but the press of her warm lips against his own wasn't altogether unpleasant. It tingled, chasing away the last vestiges of frost lingering in his veins and sending a coil of heat curling up in his gut. The kiss lasted for an eternity trapped in a heartbeat before Madiha was pulling away, shock and confusion bright in her amber eyes as she hopped to her feet and raced off to her designated bedroom. The door slid shut with a resounding smack.
Fai spent the next three hours tossing and turning in bed. Ultimately giving up altogether, he threw aside the satin sheets and climbed out of the bed. Padding across the plush carpet on bare feet, he made his way over to floor-to-ceiling window hidden behind velvet drapes. A push of a button revealed glass panes that made up one side of his room. The view of Cavahall from up there was magnificent, the gritty underbelly of the city hidden behind a glimmering curtain of twinkling lights and holographic displays.

All the gladiator teams had been moved to one of the topmost levels of The Company towers, where VIP guests were normally housed. As far as comfort and décor were concerned, everything was top of the line. Exotic plants and elegantly carved marble sculptures along with painstakingly detailed oil-paintings in ornate frames were a common sight at this level. It was hard to believe that the miserably cramped living quarters for the gladiators or the tiny cages for the Unnaturals in other programs were inside the same building.

Each suite had a balcony that could be accessed through a movable section in the window, although access for gladiators was obviously cut off. And even if they could get the windows open, the range limiters didn't work on the balconies. Any Unnatural wishing to step outside would face instant death. Fai took a moment to stand there and study the world on the other side of the glass. Far in the distance, he spotted the viewing towers that had been erected in the wastelands for the annual event. Come midday, every gladiator team that had made it to the final event would be transported to the arena.

The horizon beyond the wastelands lightened to a rosy crimson as the sun rose higher. It set the gunmetal skies above Cavahall ablaze in fiery shades while the droplets of the sludge-like rain clinging to every building glittered like rubies. It was a truly spectacular view, and under normal circumstances, Fai would have enjoyed it immensely. As it was, however, his attention had been drawn by the pair of winged structures proudly reaching for the sky beyond the wastelands.

Fai blinked, rubbing his eyes, for a moment wondering if it was just his tired brain playing tricks on him, but when the winged ruins of Clow remained a solid fixture, he felt his heart sink with dread. *I thought I had more time...* Like a poorly transmitted hologram, the sky flickered and he caught a glimpse of Ruval Castle in all its proud glory visible above Cavahall before it vanished. A pang of homesickness and longing that he hadn't felt in years hit Fai, and he stumbled closer to the window, wishing he could reach through and pluck out his first real home from the past. Unlike the glimpse he had caught of Ceres, the ruins of Clow remained visible for nearly ten minutes before slowly fading out of existence.

In that moment, Fai felt more alone than he had felt in decades. His vision grew blurry, and it was with just the barest hints of surprise that he realized he was crying. Angrily wiping at the tears, he turned away from the window and walked back to the bed. The threads of reality were fraying, causing timelines and dimensions to cross over. How long before something irreversible happened?

There would be time to feel sorry for himself when the entirety of existence wasn't at stake. He didn't have the time or the luxury for a pity party now. Not when so much was hinging on his breaking free of The Company's clutches. And of course there was the matter of his unborn children and their mother. Not to mention searching for and helping Syaoran leave Cavahall before it was too late.

Though to do that, he would need access to all of his magic, not just the meager reserves that he could control now, thanks to whatever Akira had shoved in his brain. Ever since the electric shock he'd received courtesy of the guards, right before their interviews, Fai had been growing acutely cognizant of the foreign object inside his head. It didn't hurt, but now that he knew where the blockage was, he had an awareness of how it was affecting him. The laser scalpels that he'd
secreted away from Akira's lab would be a great help in getting rid of the problem, though he wouldn't be able to anything about it by himself. He would need to recruit either Kamui or Madiha's help, but obviously they wouldn't have an idea of where to find the blockage.

Settling against the backrest, Fai reached for the shallow pool of his magical reserves and shaped it into the runes for a spell. It wasn't anything overly complicated, just a simple mapping and scanning spell that would allow him to create a detailed image of whatever it was cast on. It had been a medical spell he'd learned long before discovering that his magic couldn't heal, but he'd adapted it for use in unorthodox ways. His use of medical spells in the battlefield as offensive spells had been one of the contributing factors for him being the youngest battlemage to earn the title of D. level mage in Ceres. Just because his magic wasn't suited to healing didn't mean he couldn't cast those spells at all. There were two stages to healing the body, after all and breaking things down was usually the first step.

The cerulean strings of magic hovered in the air until he directed them towards his head and set off the trigger. Feeding the spell a steady stream of magic, Fai used it to create a detailed image of his brain and the parts most affected by the blockage. When the time was right, he would use the secondary spell coupled with the mapping spell to overlay this image into the vision of whoever agreed to work with him. Closing his eyes, Fai fell into a trance-like state as he guided his magic according to his will.

By the time breakfast rolled around, Fai had successfully mapped out everything he needed. His back and neck creaked in protest as he crawled off the mattress and headed towards the bathroom for a quick shower. A part of him briefly mourned the lost opportunity of soaking in a luxurious bath, but he pushed the feeling away and quickly stepped under the steaming spray spouting from the showerhead. He forewent the heavily scented soaps and shampoos available in the cabinet, deciding it would be foolish to use something that would make him easier to track in the arena, but let the warm water work on his stressed muscles long enough for his fingertips to turn wrinkly. Drying off, he dressed in dark blue and grey uniform provided for the gladiator teams and walked into the common room.

Kamui was already seated at the table, a plate laden with a hearty breakfast set before him as he slowly worked his way through it. There were steaming bun and buttered rolls; a variety of juices, jams, and fresh fruit; slices of bread toasted golden and eggs prepared in three different ways. A platter of cheese rested next to a jug of milk and another one filled to the brim with fresh blood. There was even a wide assortment of teas resting in crystal jars besides the napkins folded into swan shapes.

"Good morning," Fai greeted the vampire. Kamui grunted in response, taking a sip from his glass of blood as he silently observed Fai fill his plate with a bit of everything. For nearly fifteen minutes, the room was filled only with the sound of clinking cutlery as they ate. Kamui pushed his empty plate away, but instead of getting up to leave, he sat there, watching Fai with a contemplative frown on his face.

"Is something the matter?" Fai finally spoke up.

"Whatever deal it is that you've made with Lupa, it better not affect our chances in the tournament," Kamui said, eyes narrowed as he watched Fai get up. "I'm getting out of this place, one way or another."

"Then we share the same goal, Kamui-kun," Fai said, prepping a cup of tea for himself before making a second one for his sire. He'd just set it down in front of Kamui when Madiha emerged from her room, dressed in her uniform. The skintight shirt did nothing to hide the slight bulge of
her abdomen. Although it wasn't very prominent for the time being, it might prove difficult to conceal in a few weeks' time. With her head held high, she marched to the breakfast table and helped herself to the food. She made a valiant effort of pretending not to notice their presence, though the tense set of her shoulders betrayed her.

Far too soon, Kyle and Seishirou showed up to collect the team and dispense their starting kits and last minute instructions. Kyle threw three small hip pouches at them before speaking. "Thanks to the spectacular fuck up in yesterday's interview, the board of directors has decided to penalize your team," he said, eyes narrowed in displeasure behind his glasses. "So instead of starting out with all the advantages you would have gotten had someone decided to keep their mouth shut, you will find in one of those pouches a basic map of the arena. None of the other teams will be visible to you unless they're within a very narrow range to your proximity. You might receive some upgrades there once you accomplish the first task, which is to reach, unlock, and successfully defend one of the seven safe houses inside the arena." He paused, fixing them with an irritated glower. "Lupa is already aware of this, but in light of yesterday's fiasco, I feel it necessary to reiterate. Avoid the chimeras, if possible. The latest batch released into the wastelands has some variations on the deathstalker."

"The rule pertaining to a team's disqualification based on the death or incapacitation of a team member has been reinstated for this event," Seishirou added. "That would have been advantageous to you under normal circumstances but considering the handicap for your team, the best strategy would be to reach the nearest safe house as quickly as possible. Even if you might not be able to see the other teams, their maps will reveal your location in real time."

"There are basic rations for three days in each of your packs," Kyle informed them. "There will be some provisions made available in some of the safe houses, but whether it's the one you pick is anyone's guess. In case you fail to reach the safe house first, you will have to fight a series of matches against the occupying team in order to take over and kick them out. The initial matches are not death matches by requirement, but how you choose to deal with the competition for later rounds is your choice."

Kyle looked like he had something more to say, but Seishirou chose that moment to clear his throat and indicate the time.

"You, along with the other finalists, will receive the rest of your instructions en-route," Kyle said as he turned and motioned for everyone to follow him outside.

Madiha was the first one over the threshold, and although Fai knew the range limiters had been extended beyond their apartment, now that it was time to leave, for just a fraction of a second he felt his breath catch in his throat in fear. But she remained very much alive and Fai found himself quickly following in her footsteps. He had come to an understanding with both of his teammates, so the only thing he had to worry about now was how to escape. And he already had a plan in place for that. So they would be fine. Him and Madiha and their unborn twins. They would all be fine. He would make certain of that.
Bia studied her fellow directors as they filed into the conference room, waiting until four of the five unoccupied seats had filled before standing. Her heels clacked against the polished wood as she calmly made her way around the conference table. Coming to a stop behind what had always been Danish’s chair, she crossed her arms and leaned against its back, smiling at the remaining directors.

Director Mora’s expression grew pinched as her gaze travelled from the empty chair to Bia’s face though she held her tongue. Bia’s smile widened by just a fraction, knowing that the implications of her actions had not been missed. “It heartens me to see you all safe here today, in light of the recent tragedy with Director Danish.”

"The timing’s rather convenient for you, in light of his recent discovery, wouldn’t you say, Director Bia?" Director Mora asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I really hope you aren't implying that I arranged for him to get attacked." Bia gave the woman a sharp smile. "Danish and I certainly have our differences, but let's not forget that we're also family. And nothing is more important to me than family."

"Your actions regarding La Lupa seem to indicate otherwise," Director Borson said. He flicked a hand, and the condemning files Danish had sent out to the board lit up the air above the conference table. The place of honor belonged to the official request Akira had sent to Bia for the use of breeding hormones on La Lupa and Berserker. Her signatures authorizing the request were highlighted.

"The rules regarding Unnaturals in the gladiator programs are quite clear," Director Shen spoke up. "That you authorized Dr. Akira's request at such short notice is rather alarming. According to her reports, it’s only thanks to Berserker's infertility curse holding up in spite of the fertility drugs that we’re not short one of our gladiators right before this year's event. Such careless behavior from someone in your position is…" He trailed off, letting the silence hang in the air.

Rather than explaining her actions, as had been Director Shen’s intention, Bia chose to remain silent, keeping her expression placid. They would have to do a lot more than simply summon her for an explanatory meeting if they wanted her justifications,

Mora was the one to crack. "Is there anything you would like to say, Director?"

"Not really, no." Bia held back a smile at the irritation that flashed across Mora's face at her blunt refusal. Adopting a somber expression, she said, "With Director Danish unable to join us, I'm too distraught to even think about all this, let alone provide you with a suitable explanation."

"So you're saying you don't have anything for us today?" Director Borson drawled.

"No, Director Borson." Bia shook her head. "Danish should be here to hear what I have to say, so until such a time, I'm afraid I have nothing for you on this matter."

"I see. In that case, the board's official review is postponed until Director Danish's recovery," Borson declared as he dismissed the files from view.

Mora’s nostrils flared in irritation. Then again, Mora had never made it a secret about how she felt for Danish. "Director Danish may not be here but the rest of us are all present, Borson. I don't think the review should be on Director Bia's convenience, Borson. Danish may not be here, but the rest
of us are all present so we should proceed as planned."

Director Shen cut in smoothly. "Be that as it may, seeing as Director Danish was the one to initiate the request for a review, he needs to be present for us to proceed officially. Are there any other items on the agenda for us to discuss today?"

Ignoring the anger that flared across Mora’s face, Director Ruu spoke up, redirecting the conversation along a different vein. "Has there been any update on the status of the Unnatural causing the mirage phenomenon throughout Cavahall? The office of public information has been spreading rumors that we're field testing a new technology for next year's tournament. I would hate it if The Liberalists were to get their hands on such a powerful Unnatural."

"The occurrence is too random for our sensors to get a lock on the readings," Borson said as he accessed his personal data terminal and shared the latest report from the R&D's tracker division. Bia pulled out Danish's chair and sat down, cloning the report to her own terminal for a look, ignoring the venomous glare Mora sent her way.

“It appears as though these strange, otherworldly mirages are not just limited to inside the city. Reports indicate there have been sightings as far out as the wastlands.” Bia said as she scanned through the document. "The potential for such a powerful unnatural coming into its powers is vast.”

“Yes, if we are able to locate it, the Unnatural would prove useful in combatting The Liberalist’s influence inside Cavahall.” Director Shen agreed.

Unfortunately, the R&D department had been unable to triangulate the Unnatural's position so far, but the report suggested they'd be able to capture it soon enough. The mirage phenomenon appeared to be occurring more frequently, with the time between each successive occurrence growing shorter. It was only a matter of time before the Unnatural was located and brought in.

Bia considered the implications of getting her hands on such an interesting specimen. As she read through the rest of the report, she couldn’t help but smile.

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"Our errant *Lupine* has finally deigned to contact me," Nixon announced as he marched into the meeting room, dismissing the video feeds from external cameras throughout the building and switching over to the sensory implants at his temples. He headed over to the sofa where Masooma sat nursing a mug of tea and slumped onto the cushions beside her. Groaning dramatically, he rested his head on her shoulder and continued. "Kurogane wants me to give him a dose of disruptor nanites."

"How does he plan on getting past the security?" Tomoyo asked, looking up from the reports she'd received from some of her spies in The Company. The Company had been running wild with the accusations ever since the attack on Director Danish had put the man into a coma. Minor skirmishes between the Unnaturals and normal folks had been erupting all over the city, and things were only growing worse as time went on. If they didn't do something to deescalate the situation the skirmishes would devolve into an all-out war between Cavahall’s residents.

"He refused to share that part of his plan with me," Nixon replied. "He just claimed he'd figured out a way to get into the arena once the tournament begins and he's got a better idea of where his friend might be. Said something about having found someone with a common goal or something. He'll be coming over to collect the disruptor nanites."
"Great, he’s got dubious backup on a suicide mission. He’s going to get himself killed.” Tomoyo muttered, massaging her temples.

"Maybe it's someone he knows?" Masooma offered.

Tomoyo shook her head. "He doesn't know anyone in Cavahall. This is the first time his group of friends have landed in our world."

"Maybe it's another dimension traveler like him. He did mention there were others," Nixon said.

"Are you planning on giving him the nanites when he shows up?" Tomoyo asked.

"Well, I did promise to help him get his friend back. Our original plan was a bust, but he seems to have figured out a workaround to that problem. If all he needs from me now is the disruptors, then it's disruptors he gets."

"Speaking of disruptors, have you gotten a lead on what's causing the mirages?" Masooma asked as she straightened and turned to face him.

"The Company's office of public information or rather misinformation, is spreading it around that they're testing some sort of new tech, though the rumors say that it might be an unnatural manifesting their powers. If you want my opinion, based on how widespread and random the mirages are, I don't think it's either of those things."

"You might be right." Masooma frowned. It was her ‘I just recalled something that I dismissed as insignificant earlier on’ frown. "Remember what I told you about Freya's behavior when I got called to heal that hybrid of Touya's?"

"So what? You think this mirage phenomenon is being caused by that hybrid dying of a mysterious wish-curse?" Nixon asked.

"As ridiculous as it may sound, I think that exactly what's happening."

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A sudden breeze picked up, the tinkling of wind chimes breaking the silence of the night. A feeling like spiders and silken threads slipping across her skin roused Yuuko from her sleep. Sitting up in her futon, she glanced at the wind chimes tinkling in her window, watching the tiny slips of papers attached to their base flutter in the moonlight. A slow smile spread across her lips.

"I see."

Closing her eyes, Yuuko reached out with her sense of the cosmos, the one that had dubbed her the Witch of Dimensions. She saw the spiderweb cracks reaching back out from the future, sending out ripples in the dimensional walls, shifting and sliding, flexing in ways they weren't meant to.

"Yuuko!" Black Mokona hopped over to her side. "Mokona saw the other Mokona in a dream, but it was strange. There were two white Mokonas, and when Mokona called to the others, the dream shattered."

"It is time, Mokona."

"Time for what?"

"All of reality is in flux," she murmured, her eyes still closed. Reaching out with a hand, she lifted
Mokona and brought it to her face level before looking at it. "Time, space, and all the dimensions that have existed or will exist are moving out of order. Entropy is in effect, and everything is shifting to chaos. There lays an anomaly in the future, pushing all of existence to its weakest point.

"But Yuuko, if there is a weakness like that, couldn't Fei Wang Reed tap into it to fulfill his wish?"

"Entropy is bringing the past and future closer together, entwining time in ways it wouldn't normally flow in. I can sense that the shop has a different owner in the future."

"So he will fail?" Mokona asked, sounding both relieved and incredibly sad. Perhaps because it knew what a new owner for the shop meant in terms for Yuuko.

"Though it is not set in stone, it is heartening to know that the possibility of his failure is there." Yuuko smiled softly. "Perhaps, if things continue on the path they seem to be heading on, we might even meet this future owner."

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A sudden breeze picked up, the tinkling of wind chimes breaking the silence of the night. A feeling like spiders and silken threads slipping across his skin roused Watanuki from his sleep. Sitting up in his futon, he slipped on his glasses and glanced at the wind chimes tinkling in his window, watching the tiny slips of papers attached to their base flutter in the moonlight. A slow smile spread across his lips.

"I see."

"Watanuki!" Black Mokona hopped over to his side. "Mokona saw the other Mokona in a dream, but it was strange. There were two white Mokonas and when Mokona called to the others, the dream shattered."

"It is drawing nearer," Watanuki murmured.

"What is?"

Watanuki felt the subtle shift in the air, an echo of the ripples shifting through all of time and space. A shudder raced down his spine at the spiderweb cracks spreading everywhere, heading outwards from a faraway world, reaching out to the future and the past. Closing his eyes, he could almost see the way reality was warping, the threads of time entangling the past with the future, bringing the two closer than they were ever meant to be.

"The dimensions are in flux," he said, holding out a hand for Mokona to hop into before bringing the creature to his eye level. "Everything is slipping out of order. Entropy is shifting everything to chaos because of an anomaly. Reality is weakening."

"Mokona remembers Yuuko saying something like this once. But Mokona's memories of how everything went are sealed. Mokona can't remember what happened after that."

"So the effect must be reaching out far into the past." Watanuki nodded. "And Yuuko-san must have asked you to seal those memories to protect this future. Yes, I can feel it now. The past and present of this shop are melding."

I wonder. Would meeting a Yuuko-san of the past fulfill the terms of my payment?
Putting on a burst of vampire speed, Fai dove at the unnatural before him, sending the heavyset man crashing into the dirt. Using his forward momentum, Fai flipped on his hands and landed back on his feet several meters away. His opponent, given the uninspired name of The Boulder based on his earth-using abilities, shook his head like a dog shaking off water as he stood and turned to face Fai. Bending his knees, the Boulder drew closer to the ground before lifting his right foot and bringing it down in a hard stomp. Although nothing changed on the surface, Fai was able to sense the vibrations rumbling through the ground beneath his feet and he launched into the air moments before the dirt exploded in jagged spikes.

*His handler should have named him The Spike,* Fai thought wryly as The Boulder repeated his favorite attack, forcing Fai to dodge out of the way yet again. Fai moved out of the range of his opponent’s earth-controlling abilities.

The area near the safehouse Fai and his group had been aiming for was surrounded by a copse of sickly trees and shrubs. In the five days it had taken them to reach, another team had already taken it over. Had the other team stayed put, the two groups would have had to participate in matches to determine the ownership of the building but they had chosen a spot to ambush Fai’s team before they could officially enter the space to issue a challenge.

Fai’s group, with their handicapped maps, hadn’t seen their opponents until it had been too late. Their strategy had been to divide and conquer, and unfortunately, Fai had been drawn away from Kamui and Madiha. He had no idea if his opponent's teammates had managed to separate those two as well, or if the others had teamed up. Seeing how Madiha had trouble holding her transformations lately, he really hoped Kamui was with her. Scaling the nearest tree, Fai searched his surroundings for signs of his missing teammates. The Boulder found him, coming to a stop at the base of the tree.

"Get back down here, you leech!" the man growled, reminding him a little of Kurogane.

"Hmm? No, I don't think so." Fai grinned back in a way that was sure to infuriate The Boulder. The man yelled in anger, stomping his foot hard enough to leave cracks in the ground, launching a considerable sized chunk of it at Fai who barely avoided decapitation by his opponent's namesake by a hairsbreadth. Another stomp sent a ripple through the earth, racing towards the tree Fai occupied. Fai kicked off the branch and flipped through the air, grabbing an overhanging limb of a nearby tree to escape from The Boulder. Repeating the process twice more, he vaulted off the gnarled trunk of a tree at the edge of the copse and landed in a neat crouch thirty feet away from his starting point. He could hear The Boulder yelling obscenities as he followed through the underbrush, but Fai figured the man was far enough away to allow him to search for his missing companions.

Focusing on his vampire hearing this time, he picked up on the sound of angry growling coming from somewhere to his west. Recognizing it as Madiha, Fai strung together the runes for an unstable but low level spell and flung it in The Boulder's direction before racing off after his teammate.

Behind him, the spell destabilized and exploded in a manner similar to Roy's gift of controlling fire. Even with partial control over his magic, Fai could mimic the effect quite nicely, as was evidenced by even louder profanities being flung his way by The Boulder.

Much to his surprise, he found Madiha straddling another Lupine, her hands wrapped around her
opponent's neck, growling through bared teeth. Dried blood was smeared across her partially transformed lips and splattered across her cheeks and forehead. Madiha's opponent sported matching wounds on her arms. They were sluggishly healing. A deep gouge ran down the length of Madiha's thigh, visible through the rip in her pants and, unlike the other Lupine, not having begun to heal.

*Does the healing not work for pregnant lupines?* Fai frowned, wondering if he ought to step in and offer some assistance, though judging by the wheezing sound coming from the Lupine getting her throat crushed, Madiha seemed to have things well in hand. Just when it seemed that Madiha would secure a win for their team by getting rid of their opponent, she lost control of her transformation and with it, her strength. In less than a heartbeat, the tables had turned and Madiha’s opponent pounced at the opportunity to flip them around, holding Madiha down by digging her clawed hands into her shoulders. Madiha tried to buck off her opponent but it was obvious that she no longer had the strength to fight against the other Lupine on an even footing. The unnamed Lupine bared her teeth, seemingly preparing to rip out Madiha's throat.

Which was all the prompting Fai needed to flash to their side and shove his claws through the Lupine’s exposed back. Warm blood splattered across his face, sticky ichor coating his fingers as his claws emerged through the other side. Not giving the Lupine a chance to react, he ripped upwards and lifted her off of Madiha. His claws snagged at the collarbone, but a quick jerk took care of that, tearing apart her chest cavity in a manner that not even her enhanced healing could fix.

Madiha might have been able to regain the upper hand but Fai wasn’t willing to take the risk and gamble on her life. He held out a hand for Madiha, who had yet to move, and asked, "Are you okay?"

Wide-eyed, she glanced from the torn apart Lupine to his blood-covered hand before looking up at him as though seeing him for the very first time. Shaking her head, she accepted his help, though her gaze strayed back to the corpse of her opponent. "Y-Yeah, I'm fine."

Wiping his hands on his pants he looked around. "Where is Kamui-kun?"

"Strigoi got drawn away by the ice-user on their team," she answered, subtly reminding him to use The Company's assigned names, as this battle was being broadcast live. Her next words were interrupted by a loud crash, followed by the sound of heavy stomping and a staccato clicking. Kamui darted out of the treeline, looking almost as bad as Madiha, his clothes ripped in a multitude of places with sluggishly bleeding cuts of varying degrees visible through them.

"It's a chimera," he said coming to a stop by their side.

The ground beneath their feet shuddered and Fai barely managed to get summon a shield before stone spikes could impale the three of them.

"And that would be my opponent," Fai added helpfully as The Boulder finally caught up. Fai smirked at the comical sight of the man looking murderous, his uniform singed and covered in soot. The man had his gaze fixated on Fai, though his attention was quickly drawn to the blood on Fai's hands. Fai knew the moment the man's wandering eyes caught sight of the mangled body of his Lupine teammate.

"You batfucking leech! I'll fucking kill you!" he snarled, making a jerking motion with his hands, followed by a stamp that sent another volley of stone spikes flying their way. Fai's shield held under the assault, though barely. The Boulder kept up the barrage as he advanced, uncaring of the fact that his deflected attacks were crushing the already mangled body of his teammate to a bloody pulp.
Dust filled the air as the stones fell in a neat circle outside Fai's shield. Fai felt a surge of annoyance at the effort it took him to maintain such a rudimentary spell. Before whatever Akira had done to screw with his control, Fai had been able to field and redirect an entire avalanche. Now he was tiring just by powering a mid-level shield. He needed to have Kamui or Madiha get rid of that block as soon as they got to the safehouse. Maybe it was equipped with a medical kit carrying some anesthetic to numb the pain. Ignoring the beads of sweat trickling down his face, Fai pushed more magic into maintaining his shield, trying to decide on how to take The Boulder out of commission without endangering his own teammates.

Before he could settle on a course of action, however, the chimera that had been chasing Kamui emerged from the tree line, rushing straight at The Boulder. The man, blinded by his rage as he was, didn't stand a chance as the chimera chomped down on his head and ripped it off his shoulders.

Madiha muttered several foul curses under her breath as they witnessed the bloody demise of The Boulder.

"What are the chances that the chimera might not take an interest in us?" he asked. The creature was covered in prickly spines, though it appeared to be a hybrid between some bird of prey, a snake and a large cat, with a stinger in place of its tail. Some sort of insect perhaps, or maybe a scorpion. The creature turned to regard the trio before bounding in their direction.

"Oh fuck!" Madiha's curse perfectly summed up Fai's feeling on the matter as he reached into his diminishing well of magic and readied a spell to counter the creature's attack. Behind him, Kamui and Madiha -who had regained control of her transformation once more- readied to counter the creature as well.

Yuui dug his fingers into the soft leather armrests as he viewed the fight being broadcast on the massive holographic screen before him. His brother's team appeared to be holding their own against the chimera, though all it would take was one unfortunate scrape against the deadly paralytic-covered spines to turn the tide in favor of the creature. Wearing his Ashura guise, Yuui sat in the VIP booth of viewing center in the arena, sharing it with several of The Company's directors and various elite of the city.

A buffet table was set up along the length of the room to his right where some of the elites mingled, sparing a glance now and then for the matches being displayed on the multitude screens. The others around him were loudly ooh-ing and aah-ing at near misses as his brother's team tried to work in tandem to bring the chimera down.

"Mr. Veda." Director Bia offered him a beaming smile as she strolled up to him, carrying two flutes filled with sparkling champagne. "I trust you're enjoying the show?"

Cursing internally, Yuui forced himself to relax his posture and turned around to face the woman with a matching smile. "Oh yes, my dear. This year's exhibition is quite… exquisite." He accepted the drink she held out for him and gestured to the empty seat next to him, turning away from the sight of his brother fighting for his life. Yuui wanted nothing but to watch Fai on screen and perhaps send in a few hundred tokens to even the odds stacked against his team. Sadly, he had a cover to maintain, and so he had to socialize and laugh and pretend like it wasn't his twin out there in the arena while Yuui sat in the proverbial viper's den.

"See any that you like?" Bia asked, gesturing towards the holo-screens showing the teams scattered all over the arena.
"A few have caught my interest, yes, though if they'll manage to keep it remains to be seen."

"Any bets on who might be this year's winner?"

"I'm not a gambling man, my dear."

"We both know that's a lie, Mr. Veda." Bia laughed, and Yuui forced himself to laugh alongside her. On screen, Fai narrowly avoided getting impaled on a spike jutting out from the chimera's back as the ice-user from his opponent's team showed up in the clearing to join the fight. Either the man hadn't seen the dead bodies of his teammates or he cared very little for their health. "Whatever became of the Lupine you had intended to sign up for this year's event, if you don't mind my asking?"

"It died."

"How tragic." Bia took a sip from her champagne flute. "There's always next year. And you can always submit one of the champions you buy from this year's tournament."

"Of course." Yuui smiled, glancing back at the screen showing his brother.

"Berserker is a truly remarkable specimen," Bia said, following the direction of his gaze.

"It reminds me of this boy I used to know as a child," Yuui found himself admitting.

"Oh?" Bia perked up in interest.

"He was killed in the crossfire during a raid for unnaturals," Yuui said as he glanced at the drink in his hand and suddenly found himself wishing for something stronger. "He was dubbed as collateral damage of the fight and brushed under the metaphorical rug."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Losing someone to the barbarity of unnaturals is always difficult." Bia's fingers brushed his arm before she gracefully rose to her feet. "I hope you enjoy the rest of today's showing. I'm afraid I have to go and mingle some more."

"I had hoped to have the pleasure of your company for a while longer, but when duty calls..." He grinned and watched as she sashayed away. The moment she was engaged in a conversation with one of the other elites, Yuui focused his attention back on screen, just in time to see his brother impale the chimera on a spike made of ice that must have been conjured by the ice-user, Yue. Looking at the screen displaying gladiator stats, he realized that the ice-user had been killed sometime during his conversation.

On screen, the chimera thrashed about in its death throes before finally going still. Strigoi approached the creature and sank his claws deep into its stomach. Ripping it open, he retrieved the box contained anti-paralytic and paralytic darts from the storage chambers in the chimera's chest cavity. They went through their perished opponents' belongings before scavenging whatever useful items they could salvage. Stuffing everything into a bag that Yue had been wearing, they moved on towards the safe house only to discover that The Boulder had damaged the structural integrity of the building.

Seeing the despondent look on his brother's face, Yuui summoned a personal screen and sent off map upgrades and medical supplies for Fai's team. A short while later, the deliveries were made and he watched them settle around the upgraded map to decide on a new location for shelter. In the end, it was Lupa who pointed to a system of caverns located to the north of where they were that could serve them well. Unfortunately, the caverns were surrounded by toxic radioactive waste, which rendered data transmissions in that area very unreliable. Pockets of such deadzones were
scattered throughout the wastelands though The Company couldn’t cordon those off without giving it away to the Gladiators that such zones existed in the first place.

Yuui kept a close watch on the group as they set off in that direction until signal interference rendered them invisible beyond the white noise being displayed on screen.

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Fai stoked the fire, keeping an eye on the holo-map in case one of the other teams were drawn to their location. As far as he could see, all the teams had settled in for the night to wait out the storm currently raging through the wastelands. The acid rain came down in sheets from the sky, bringing back memories of a simpler time that he'd spent huddled in a crumbling building with his friends in Acid Tokyo.

As soon as the thought came to him, Fai couldn't help but snort at the irony. With how screwed up everything was now, back then could indeed have been considered simpler. After all, he'd only had to worry about Ashura-ou tracking him down, having to kill Kurogane for Fei Wang Reed at an indeterminate time, and protecting Sakura while he agonized over what to do about Syaoran's weakening seal. Now, he had to not only think about about protecting and rescuing his unborn twins and their mother, surviving a death match tournament with the odds stacked against them, breaking out of a containment area with nanites set to make them all explode the moment they set foot outside, and thinking up a way to warn Kurogane and/or Sakura about reality destroying anomaly that Syaoran's continued presence in Cavahall was creating. Oh and convincing Kamui or Madiha to perform an amateur brain surgery on him to get rid of the blocks that Akira introduced currently inhibiting him from utilizing his magic. Compared to all that, Acid Tokyo was certainly a simpler time.

He glanced at the sleeping forms of his teammates, curled up near the back of the cave where they'd taken shelter. Madiha's breathing was deep and even, the stains on her bandaged leg still a bright red as the wound refused to heal and continued to bleed sluggishly. Maybe pregnant lupines lost their accelerated healing though it seemed counterintuitive to Fai. Kamui's breathing was shallow enough to make Fai think he was only pretending to sleep. Scanning the map once more to ensure that none of the other teams had thought to approach their group, he traced out the runes to access the pocket dimension he'd stored the laser scalpel in. Summoning it to the palm of his hand, he looked at Kamui's stiff back.

"I know you're awake, Kamui-kun," he said and watched as the vampire sat up and turned to regard him with narrowed eyes.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded, gesturing at the scalpel in Fai's hand.

"I stole it from Akira's l-lab."

"What for?"

Fai took a deep breath, wondering if he shouldn't have waited for Madiha to waken and ask her instead. But then again, Kamui was awake and he'd already seen the scalpel. Plus, going by Kamui's open contempt for him, Fai was certain there'd be less of a chance of him refusing to go along with Fai's plan. Not to mention that Kamui was more emotionally stable of the two.

"I need a favor." He cast the spell to summon the scan he had taken of his brain nearly a week ago and highlighted the blocks inhibiting his magic. "I need you to remove these for me."

Kamui studied the scan, confusion flitting across his face as he seemed to struggle to understand
Fai’s request. The moment it clicked, however, his eyes blew wide and he nearly gaped at Fai, looking pale. "You're insane."

"So I h-have been told numerous times."

Kamui studied his face closely. When he spoke, the horror and disbelief was clear in his voice. "You're serious about this. You want me to perform an amateur brain surgery on you, without the proper tools or training."

"It's either you or Madiha."

"Why not wait until we can get you to a professional surgeon?"

"These blocks are inhibiting my magic. Today's fight h-has made it clear that with Madiha's current condition, me being h-h-handicapped could get us all killed."

"So could this madness. I could very well end up lobotomizing you(,)" Kamui argued. "And then where will I be? Lupa can barely keep hold of her transformation long enough. I don't need any more dead weight on the team."

"I wouldn't ask this of you if this wasn't important."

"We don't have any sedatives," Kamui pointed out. Fai took it as an encouraging sign that he hadn't outright refused. "And I doubt you'd be able to hold still long enough for me to get to that thing otherwise."

"What about the paralytic darts we obtained from the chimera?"

"They're a slow-acting poison, you idiot!" Kamui snapped as he seemed to put together Fai's plan in his head. "If this amateur surgery doesn't kill you, the paralytic surely will."

"We h-have the antidote as well."

"That only works if it's given within a certain amount of time. The longer we wait, the more damage the paralytic will have caused. The poison is designed to attack accelerated healing. You won't survive this if you're thinking of using chimera venom."

"The only h-h-hope we have of getting out of h-here alive is if I can access all of my magic, Kamui-kun. I can disable the nanite inhibitors without killing any of us, but to do that, I need all of my magic."

Kamui clenched his hands into fists and glared at Fai who felt his heartbeat speed up. He really didn't want to have to ask Lupa to perform the surgery but he would if Kamui refused. Though he was hoping Kamui said yes since Lupa’s hands hadn’t stopped shaking since they’d reached the caves. An eternity seemed to pass as Kamui gowered at Fai before he looked away.

"Fine." Kamui grit out and Fai felt his heart lift. “But only if Lupa agrees to it as well."
Kurogane plucked the silver matchbox from Nixon's outstretched hand, eyeing the packaging critically as he brought it closer to his face.

"The nanites have enough juice in them to disable the inhibitors for two people," Nixon said, making Kurogane pause in his inspection of the device.

"Two?"

"Uh-huh." Nixon nodded, looking pleased with himself. "Don't worry, you won't have any trouble getting your friend out of there with these babies."

"Do you have another set of these?" Kurogane asked struggling to keep his voice level as cold dread rose to his throat. That's not going to be enough for all three.

"I didn't think you'd need more than that, so I only synthesized a dose for a single carrier. I mean, it's not like you can get the base components in a supermarket."

Kurogane glanced at Subaru sitting next to him. The younger vampire's face was set in a mask of polite interest, though he still caught the flash of worry in his eyes.

"Thank you for your help, Nixon-san," Subaru said before Kurogane could speak up. Smoothing the front of his jacket, he stood up and shook the blind idiot's hand, forcing Kurogane to unfreeze his limbs and follow suit. Subaru turned to him, his expression pinched. "We must get going if we're to make it in time for our next meeting."

"Yeah." A ragged feeling curdled up in his chest, though Kurogane quickly tamped down on the panic clawing its way through his stomach. What the fuck am I supposed to do now?

His nerves sparked bright and hot and he couldn't help but grind his teeth as they stepped out of the shady bar and into the drizzling street. The sense of gloom pervading their surroundings made it hard for Kurogane to think, though he knew panicking would serve no purpose. He was only thankful that Subaru hadn't attempted to strike up a conversation with him so soon after leaving. After all, he had no idea what he'd say once the young vampire asked him the inevitable question: Who would they leave behind?

It wasn't until they were halfway to their temporary hideout that Subaru finally spoke. "I don't think Touya-san will be very happy to hear about the nanites' limitation."

Kurogane merely grunted in response, which Subaru seemed to take as an invitation to continue.

"Have you thought about what you'll say to him?"

"I have. The bastard will just have to deal with it."

"And if he doesn't?"

Tightening his grip around the tiny silver box in his fist, Kurogane felt his resolve harden. "Then I'll deal with him."

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Contrary to Subaru's prediction, they didn't find out whether Touya would have been upset with the
nanites' limitations. Souma had arrived at the border fence to welcome them once they'd collected Mokona from their hideout and arrived at the Scavenger base. She'd taken them directly to the underground room where the bastard had been keeping the kid and Cavahall's version of the princess. Before the alpha could open his mouth to speak, however, Mokona had hurled out of its hiding place in Kurogane's jacket pocket and bounded across the room to Syaoran's side.

"Syaoran!" The manjuu cried, reaching out with a stubby paw to pat the kid's blood-splattered cheek. The boy's skin was white as death in a stark contrast to the tears of blood sluggishly drizzling down the sides of his face, the bruise-like dark circles beneath his eyes, and his chest rattled with every pump of air forced inside through the breathing tubes. "Syaoran!"

"What the hell is that thing?" Touya demanded as he advanced on the manjuu, stopping only when Kurogane growled and stepped into his path.

"Mokona," Subaru answered when it became obvious that Kurogane wouldn't respond.

"Interesting."

"It's not up for trade," Kurogane said, correctly identifying the hungry gleam in Touya's eyes.

"Not even for your friend?" Touya cajoled.

"I'm not trading one friend for the other."

"I see."

"Syaoran is dying, Kurogane!" Mokona wailed. A heavy lump of ice settled just above his diaphragm with those words, the chill radiating outwards and making him break out into goosebumps. He had already suspected it, already having seen the kid's condition on his last visit, but hearing the manjuu confirm his fears only made it that much more real.

"Can you send him to the princess?" Kurogane asked, moving to the kid's side, noting the way his veins had become visible through the papery-skin.

"Mokona can try." And with that, the manjuu summoned its magic circle, lifting off the ground as snow white feathers sprouted from its back.

Iridescent smoke emanated from the runic circle on the floor, curling around Kurogane's legs but otherwise leaving him whole as it rose in gentle spirals, coiling around the kid's prone body. Wherever it touched him, Syaoran dissolved into the smoke as the entire room lit up in a gentle golden glow. As the smoke reached his chest, however, the five circular scars around his heart began to glow a malevolent dark green, halting the effect of the dimensional transportation. Time crawled to a near halt, the shimmering smoke turning the same malevolent green as the scars. For a heartbeat, all of reality froze. And then an invisible bell tolled, shattering the stillness as the smoke spewed in reverse. It reached him and Kurogane hissed in pain as it burnt his flesh like acid. He tried jumping out of the runic circle, only to find himself unable to move.

The bell rang again making the air itself shudder. The golden glow of the transportation circle turned black as a heavy oppressive feeling permeated the room. Mokona let out a startled cry as dozens of thorny, eldritch vines erupted from the scars, wrapping around the kid and sinking into the ground below him. Some of the vines burst out of the ground below Kurogane's feet and the spot where Mokona hovered in the air, trapped by the acid smoke. They speared through Mokona's wings and his limbs, tearing into his very soul and the pain rendered him insensible. Outside of the circle, someone was shouting, but the sound was muffled against his ears as a
sudden, inexplicable panic took hold of him.

He couldn't breathe and the world—no, reality itself—felt wrong. Everything was wrong. His lungs stung and Kurogane knew that he needed to breathe as spots began dotting his vision but he couldn't... he couldn't...

The world splintered.

Fracturing and fragmenting into sparkling shards, all of reality glittered like stars in the space between dimensions. Two dozen shards to the left, he spotted Nihon, Tomoyo kneeling in prayer at the shrine. Half a dozen down from there he saw Castle Ruval, the mage's king Ashura asleep in a magical slumber beneath a frozen lake. Above was Jade country, the way it had been when they had first set out on their journey, Sakura chained to the ground in a castle. To his left was Cavahall as it was at present, Touya, Souma and Subaru staring wide-eyed and horrified at what had become of reality. Behind the manjuu, in a shard that sparkled brightly, he could see himself, the mage, the kid, and the princess as they had been when they'd arrived at the witch's shop, drenched in rain and bargaining for a means to travel the dimensions.

Far way, gleaming in this myriad of broken existence and fractured dimensions, he saw the mage impaled on more of the eldritch vines. Their eyes met just as another gong sounded and the shards shifted. Now, where there had been Nihon before, Kurogane saw something that he had yet to experience as he spoke with the mage inside a high rise building in Piffle as Tomoyo and a dark-haired version of Masooma stood nearby. In place of Jade was the sacred underground reservoir of Clow, a young kid meeting a young princess for the very first time. The mage's companions from the gladiator tournament had taken the place of Touya, Souma and Subaru, trying to revive an unconscious mage who bled from his eyes, mouth, nose, and ears. A small, black copy of the runic circle was visible beneath his body.

A fifth gong struck and the fragmented reality shuddered. The mage was yelling something, but no sound crossed the void that they currently occupied. Seemingly with great effort, the mage moved out his arm, his face contorting in pain as the vines tore through his flesh, refusing to move with him. Blue runes burned in the space his fingers crossed as a complex spell took form. Blood dripped from his nose and eyes as he appeared to struggle with his casting. A blue aura enveloped the eldritch vines as the spell-chain shot across the void and encircled Syaoran. The spell sank into his prone body and spread outwards through the vines which began to retract.

The pain receded, and Kurogane found himself able to breathe. The void between dimensions glowed the same blue as the mage's spell as the shards came together and reality righted itself once more. Kurogane came to on the floor next to Syaoran's sickbed, coughing up blood and blinking the same from his eyes. Mokona was collapsed on top of Syaoran, its wings sluggishly shrinking as it whimpered. The blue of Fai's magic vanished, leaving behind the stench of ozone.

"What the fuck just happened?" Touya growled, eyes blown wide as he looked from Mokona to him and back to the manjuu again. "What did that thing just do?"

Mokona whimpered again, sobbing for Syaoran as it patted the kid's hollowed cheeks.

"Manjuu?" Kurogane asked. That single word felt as though gravel was sanding the insides of his throat. He needed water...

"Syaoran is stuck."

"What do you mean the kid is stuck?"
"Syaoran is entangled with Cavahall's reality now," the creature sobbed. "If Mokona tries to send him to Sakura again, what just happen might happen again. Mokona can't send Syaoran anywhere."

"I thought you said Syaoran was dying here." Touya directed the question at Kurogane, finally getting the hint that Mokona wouldn't be answering him.

"He is, but the Manjuu will need the mage's help to send him away."

"The hybrid in the tournament? How will he be able to help?" Souma quirked a brow.

"Fai stopped Mokona's transportation circle just now when it got stuck because of Syaoran."

"All we saw was a weird light show."

_Light show? Did they not see anything because they weren't stuck inside Mokona's spell like me? But how the hell did the mage appear in that place?_

"Kurogane, we need Fai," Mokona said.

"We need an answer," Touya said. "What the hell was all that?"

"The manjuu just told you." Kurogane grunted, picking the dimension hopper up from Syaoran's chest and handing it over to Subaru. "Guard it with your life while I get your brother. And you," he turned to Touya, narrowing his eyes at the annoyed alpha, "show me the tunnel entrance to the arena."

"Remember our deal about Lupa or you won't see the kid again, Kuanos." Touya added as hegestured for Souma to approach.

Kurogane avoided looking at Subaru as he grunted an affirmative.

Souma transported them to an underground mine, a half-collapsed tunnel leading into the darkness before them. Collecting the holomap of the cave system that Touya held out for him, Kurogane wished that he'd had a chance to drink some water before he stepped into the darkness. Calling on his _Lupine_ vision to guide the way, he tried not to think about what the hell he would do when he finally reached the mage. Just who the hell would he leave behind?

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Fai choked on the blood filling his lungs, turning over on his hands and knees as he vomited it all. Greedily drawing in air, he squeezed his eyes shut and trembled from the phantom pains still wracking his body as the fatigue from his intense spell-casting assaulted him. It was a soul-deep weariness that left him wishing for a cool dark room to sleep in until it no longer felt like his spirit would crumble to dust and leave his body a lifeless husk.

"What the fuck was that?" Madiha demanded, sounding terrified. Her question reminded him of what he had been trying to convince her of, when he'd been assaulted by the spell that reeked of decay and something putrid. It had carried a hint of Mokona's magic, though it hadn't been until Fai had found himself drifting in the space between dimensions with fragments of reality glittering all around him that he'd realized what had happened. Mokona, Kurogane and Syaoran were all trapped in the same decaying magic, far out of his reach, Mokona's dimensional transportation spell morphing and mutating into the abomination that had fractured the world.

It had taken everything Fai had in him to sever Mokona's spell before it could mutate out of control. He had tried to warn them against trying it again, though he didn't think they'd heard him.
Even so, Mokona must have realized what had happened, and it was smart enough not to try something of that nature again. But even, time was running out and he really needed Madiha to agree and let him go through with the surgery. He needed to get rid of these blocks in his brain.

"I'm going to die if I don't get the blockage out of my head," Fai rasped, refraining from adding that so would they. If they waited too long, it wouldn't matter if Fai managed to make it to Syaoran. He would be so deeply entangled with Cavahall that even Fai wouldn't be able to send him away. And if it got to that stage, all of reality would implode, taking everyone with it.

"I-I… I didn't think the blockage was actively killing you." Madiha sounded shaken as Fai tried to get the trembling in his limbs under control. Having to force his astral projection to move actively against the decaying magic had hurt. It still hurt.

"We're running out of time," he said, sitting on his knees as he wiped the blood out of his eyes. His whole face felt sticky with it.

"You really think Strigoi performing this surgery on you is the best solution?"

"Given our present circumstances? Yes, I do."

Madiha gave him an unreadable look, then gave a terse nod as she reached into her hip pouch and withdrew the injection containing the chimera venom they'd collected earlier. "All right. Let's do this."

Ignoring the tightening in his chest at the thought of something going awry, Fai accepted the injection and summoned the laser scalpel from his pocket dimension. "L-Let's begin."
Waking Nightmares

When Fai had proposed using the chimera venom as a paralytic, he'd known it would hurt. But the venom didn't just hurt: it *burned*, filling his bones, his veins, his very blood with fire as the paralytic spread, robbing him of control of his limbs. A tiny pebble dug into the small of his back, and the earth was cold beneath his palms as his breathing slowed.

"Here goes," Kamui murmured as he powered on the scalpel. The air hummed with its energy. Fai swallowed the saliva gathering in the back of his mouth as strange shadows played at the edges of his vision. The liquid formed a lump in his throat, refusing to budge, sitting there heavy as a stone as the shadows took the shape of long dead faces. It was with a jolt of dread that Fai realized what he'd overlooked. In addition to being a paralytic, the chimera venom was also a hallucinogen.

*This is going to be fun.*

The stench of burnt hair reached his nose moments before the scalpel touched his head. Ashura-ou's face, dripping with fresh blood, hovered above him, his sorrowful amber eyes silently observing Fai as the scalpel cut his fleshed to reach his skull. He only had a moment to be thankful that he had anchored the scanning spell to Kamui's vision before the pain registered and his muscles seized.

Blood dribbled through his hair, pooling beneath his head, iron mingling with petrichor and burning hair. His brother's emaciated face joined Ashura-ou's, glassy eyes silently accusing him as matted blond hair spilled down to the earth and over Fai's mouth. A sensation like fire and ice spread across his skin wherever his brother's hair touched. The feeling reached all the way to the tips of his fingers and toes, encasing him in ice and locking him in place. His mother and father, their faces blurred by the passage of time, joined his brother and king, silent and accusing.

Mother reached out with claws of ice, stabbing into his chest, and Fai jerked. He croaked, the sound garbled by the blood in his throat. It dribbled past his lips as he felt himself drifting.

"— his heart —me… —ti-venom now!"

Icy fingers touched his face, but Fai didn't have the strength to move. It felt like an eternity since he'd had that sort of strength.

"— fucking scared me," a woman was saying, and it took him a moment to identify her as Lupa… no, wait… she was Madiha now, wasn't she? They'd reached an understanding and everything. "— do that to us. —can't go through with this. I'm sorry. We'll just have to find a way to make this work."

Fai blinked, dark shadows clouding his vision momentarily before slipping away. A bleeding wrist was pressed to his lips, and as the warm liquid trickled down his parched throat, he felt his strength return.

"Did you get them?" he managed to croak once Madiha withdrew her wrist and used the piece of gauze she had bound her leg with – the wound there having healed sometime before they'd begun the procedure- to wrap the new wound.

Kamui held up a tiny glittering piece of metal in response, though the world remained hazy before his eyes. "I managed to get to one of them."

"What… what about the other?" Fai struggled to push himself up on his elbows before facing his
"You went into cardiac arrest."

"You need to get it out."

"Didn't you hear what I just said?" Kamui looked upset, eyes alight with worry and lips pulled down in a frown. It was a strange look for him. Fai hadn't thought he'd cared. "You almost died!"

"Look, I know the risks but you need to get the other one out," Fai said.

"You didn't stutter," Madiha said. "Maybe whatever it was doing to you, now that Strigoi has got it out, you've got enough time to get help from a professional."

"I still can't properly access or control my magic, and we're running out of time."

"You won't be able to help anyone if you're dead."

"I'll be dead either way," Fai replied, refusing to back down. Maybe he should have sat them down and explained what was really going on. Even if it might have been unwise to give out all the details of his past within the hearing of The Company, he could have given them the abridged version of events, like the fact that Syaoran was unknowingly causing the collapse of all of reality and that he needed to go find him and send him away before Syaoran got too entrenched in Cavahall’s reality to cross the dimensional barriers. Now it was too late. The rain had let up sometime during the surgery, and now any number of their opponents could be headed their way. They needed to get through the rest of the procedure before anyone found them.

"And if I refuse to do this?" Kamui challenged.

"It's the only way you have of regaining your freedom, Kamui-kun. Of making it back to your brother."

Kamui’s jaw tightened. Fai was afraid that he would refuse to cooperate as his sire glared at him. In the end, after a heartbeat that lasted an eternity, Kamui sighed and looked away.

"If you die, I will find a way to bring you back and end you in the most painful way imaginable," Kamui promised as he withdrew another syringe filled with chimera venom and tossed it over to Fai, who caught it in one hand. "Your healing is already compromised from the first dose."

"There has to be another way," Madiha insisted. "You won't be able recover this quickly next time."

"We'll have to take that risk," Fai said before plunging the needle into his arm. The ice and fire returned to his veins as he collapsed to the ground. Madiha hovered above him for a moment, her fingers brushing against his arm and igniting sparks like lightning along his skin before she murmured something about keeping watch and retreated.

The scalpel buzzed back to life, burning through his flesh as Kamui sliced it apart to reach his skull. Fai's breathing slowed even as agony returned, the venom slowly eating away at him. His throat was on fire. It hurt and hurt and he couldn't do anything as it ate its way into him, burning the skin away like old paper, leaving just a glistening red mass of exposed muscle and bones in its wake. Pain. So much - he just wanted it to stop.

Shadows danced all around him, turning into phantoms of people he had known once upon a time. The castle servants and villagers who lived near Ruval Castle joined his brother, his king, and his
parents, all of them crowding him. And then they parted to make way for Syaoran, who stepped up to him with golden, catlike eyes, blood smeared across his face. He held up a clawed hand, displaying his bloody fingers for Fai to see.

"How could you do this to me, Fai-san?" Fangs peeked from beneath Syaoran's lips as he spoke. "You killed me. And then you turned me into a monster."

Sakura, Kurogane, and Mokona stood behind him, faces twisted in hatred. Sakura looked disappointed, and Kurogane gave him a disgusted sneer. Fai had had a lifetime to get used to people looking at him with those expressions, but seeing them on the faces of his found family cut him through to the bone. He'd never wanted for them to look at him like that. "Why did you do it, mage?"

"Why, Fai-san? Why did you kill Syaoran?"

"Let me show you how I felt," Syaoran murmured before plunging his claws deep into Fai’s chest to reach his heart.

The iron tang of blood hit him like a brick to the face as the pressure around his chest increased. He couldn't draw in a proper breath, gasping and choking on the blood filling his throat. It hurt. Everything hurt. Agony seared a trail through his chest, scorching his lungs and shriveling his heart that was gripped tightly in Syaoran's claws.

Stop!

Oh Kerkés, he wanted it to stop!

He wanted to rest. Wanted to sleep. To not have to fight anymore. So he let himself slip into the sweet bliss of oblivion.

Far away a woman screamed, and phantom hands stabbed something sharp into his chest.

He drifted far from the pain, dreaming of his family. Of Sakura and Syaoran, Kurogane and Mokona. The four of them happily living in a little cottage at the edge of the woods below Castle Ruval. He dreamed of Kurogane working his way through the firewood as Fai cooked a hearty breakfast in the kitchen. Mokona bounced from room to room, person to person, its happy chatter filling the air. Sakura and Syaoran sat in the library, the latter explaining the methods he employed to translate the complex and obscure text into modern language. A pair of brown-haired, blue eyed twins played on the ground near him, using a basic hover charm to levitate a set of building blocks as Madiha watched them with an indulgent smile. Kamui showed up with Subaru and Seishirou, the latter of whom withdrew a gun and a crossbow from within his trenchcoat.

The bullet shattered Sakura's skull and the crossbow bolt tore a hole in Syaoran's throat. Fai wanted to scream, but he continued humming, pouring the sticky pancake batter into the pan and flipping the sunny side-up eggs onto a plate. Kurogane appeared in the doorway missing both arms and drenched in blood. Still humming, Fai nimbly stepped over the spreadeagled corpses of his twins lying in a pool of blood and set the breakfast down in front of Kurogane, who sat on the table across from Syaoran. Akira showed up with a laser scalpel and a jug of orange juice. She poured Fai a glass before approaching Madiha, who continued to smile at their kids even as Akira shoved the scalpel into the Lupine’s chest.

Cold fingers grabbed his chin before someone slapped him on the cheek, hard. Fai bit his tongue, feeling bile at the back of his throat, tinged with the all too familiar taste of blood. A film of tears had unwillingly spilled from beneath his lashes, turning the world blurry. Fai shuddered, coming
back to himself by painful inches.

"Wha… is goin…" His words slurred together, and the urge to vomit crawled up his stomach. His body was too hot, too cold, icy cold, too hot… chills and sweat trailed his skin from spine to toes. He couldn't see anything, but a fleshy blob hovered above him, fading into the darkness of oblivion.

Another sharp slap had him jerking awake, startled by the sting so at odds with the rest of his aching body.

"Now now, we can't have you sleeping for such a momentous event," a voice murmured, humor painting his words on a frame of nonchalance.

"Who…" Fai felt as though his mouth was stuffed full of cotton, his limbs weighed down by lead. He blinked. Once. Twice. The world slowly drew into focus. The fleshy blob resolved into a face he hadn't expected to see inside the arena.

"So glad to have you awake, leech." Ryanban leered, lips peeling apart to display a pair of fangs. It took Fai a moment to realize that there was blood smeared across the man's face. The last and only time Fai had met the man in Cavahall had been after his very first escape attempt when he had introduced himself as the head of security for The Company. *When did he get turned into a vampire?* Fai tried jerking his head up to glare at the man, but the paralytic had yet to wear off.

His vision sharpened as the scent of freshly spilled blood hit his nose. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Kamui crouched defensively over Madiha's prone form, the dying laser scalpel clenched firmly in his hand as a pool of blood rapidly grew beneath his feet despite his lack of obvious injuries. Had he already healed from the damage or… It took Fai's sluggish mind a moment to realize that Madiha wasn't moving. Why… what happened to her? Had Ryanban hurt her?

A pair of chimeras, smaller in size than the one their team had encountered earlier, bore down on his teammates. They were each the size of a horse, with sharp stingers like those of a scorpion. The one on the right bore the scarlet of its victim's blood. Ryanban moved into his line of vision, forcing Fai to focus on the vampire crouched above him instead of his teammates. Ryanban's grin widened, though it did nothing to mask the barely held back fury. His eyes promised his intent to hurt Fai, like he wanted to cut him up until there was nothing left.

"You cost me *everything,*" Ryanban said before he glanced over his shoulder to where his pet chimeras advanced on Kamui and Madiha. "Now I'm going to take it all from you."

Fai felt his fingers twitch, but he wasn't certain if the man noticed the movement as he rose and pressed a booted foot down on Fai's chest. Fai gasped for breath, his throat working raggedly to draw air in and failing as the pressure on his chest increased.

*I noticed Lupa is having trouble with its healing and transformations.* Ryanban's expression was one of sadistic glee, savoring Fai's struggles as the manic grin spread further across his face. "You got the bitch pregnant, didn't you? Heh. Figures. Akira always finds a way to get what she wants in the end, doesn't she? Now she'll have a pair of hybrid bastards to cut up and toy with. That is, if I don't slice your bitch open before that. Looking forward to being a daddy, were you, Berserker?"

Fai could hear the sound of fighting and struggling behind Ryanban. Having yet to regain control of his limbs, however, Fai couldn't even move his head to look at how Kamui was holding up against the pair of chimeras.
Ryanban leaned over him, increasing the pressure on his chest to the point where it felt as though his ribs might snap. A choked wheeze escaped him as black splotches ate at the edges of his vision. Ryanban said something, but Fai couldn't hear him over the ringing in his ears.

He did notice when Ryanban shifted his position so that instead of directly pressing down on Fai's chest, the boot rested on his collarbone. Glacial sparks like lightning shot up his right arm as meaty fingers grabbed his wrist. Fai's eyes widened in alarm as his hazy mind deduced Ryanban's intention moments before the man gripped his arm tightly with both hands and wrenched.

The world exploded in white as the venom burning through his veins intensified the pain of having his shoulder dislocated.

*He wants to cripple me before he kills me,* a distant part of his mind noted as Ryanban gripped his left arm. A muffled scream tore out Fai's throat as his left arm was yanked from its socket.

The pressure on his chest returned, pushing harder and harder until the bone snapped and molten iron filled his lungs. A part of him wished for nothing more than for someone to come and save him. His twins, Madiha, Syaoran… He still had so much to do. He couldn't die now, but Kamui was still occupied defending Madiha from the chimeras. Ryanban had grabbed hold of his foot, taking his time twisting the joint because there was no one around.

*No one is coming…*

Cohesive thought turned into a struggle as Fai lost the fight to stay conscious. Just a split second before he surrendered to the darkness, however, Fai imagined hearing Kurogane's angry snarl, like a furious wolf coming to the rescue.

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Kurogane spat out the chunk of flesh he had torn out of the bastard's throat, watching ashen veins rise along Ryanban's exposed skin as he collapsed into a heap on the muddy ground. Whirling on his feet, he summoned *Ginryuu* and shot forwards, slicing through the two chimeras attacking the mage's team. He only spared a fraction of a second to ensure that there were no more immediate threats around before he darted back to Fai's side. The mage lay supine on the ground, both arms bent at odd angles and lips rapidly turning blue despite the blood dribbling past them.

"Fuck!" Transforming his hand into a claw, he sliced through the mage's shirt, exposing the state of his chest. Beneath the bruises and the blood, he could see the broken ribs sticking out oddly. *That fucking bastard broke his ribs!*

The first slivers of fear skittered up Kurogane's spine as a thought rose to the fore of his mind. What if, after going through all that crap, the mage died in his arms? *What if I fail to save him?* He banished the thought as quickly as it came. He wasn't going to fucking fail. Not now.

Spotting the empty syringe lying next to the mage, miraculously undamaged in the scuffle, a crude idea formed in his head. Recalling the lessons he had acquired in various dimensions on first-aid techniques, Kurogane quickly moved to set the broken ribs as best as he could before Fai's accelerated healing fixed them in the wrong way. Once done, he grabbed the syringe and inserted the needle just above the rib where the mage's lung had collapsed, slowly pulling on the plunger as he went. He had to repeat the process several times before his enhanced hearing picked up on the sound of proper breathing instead of that awful wheezing rasp.

Sighing in relief, Kurogane sat back on his haunches for a moment before glancing over his shoulder to where Kamui was tending to Lupa. She, like the mage, was unconscious and sluggishly
bleeding from the puncture wound in her side. Had one of the chimeras gotten to her? For a bloodthirsty badass, she sure went down without putting up much of a fight, Kurogane scoffed, trying not to feel like a hypocrite as he recalled his own encounter with the chimera down in the tunnels.

"She going to be okay?"

"I don't know." Kamui's uncertain tone had Kurogane frowning. He had a feeling he was missing something major. "The venom's slowed down her healing to nothing, and she's lost a lot of blood already. How is Berserker?"

"He'll live," Kurogane replied as he worked on resetting the mage's arms back in their sockets.

"I see" was all Kamui said before he withdrew the holo-map and began scanning it for approaching opponents. Surprisingly, there was no one else around for miles. They sat side by side in silence for what felt like an eternity waiting for Lupa and the mage to awaken.

Kamui was the first to break the silence, though his gaze remained decidedly fixed on the holo-map. "Why did you help us? Are you hoping to team up with us for the rest of the tournament?"

"I'm not a contestant," Kurogane grunted.

"Oh?"

"I'm an old friend of the mage's. Your brother helped me find a way to get in."

"If you were hoping to get him out, I should warn you that he's been injected a modified version of the range limiters. All three of us have been, in fact. He sets one toe outside the boundary, he explodes."

"Tch. Figures." Kurogane debated whether he ought to mention the nanites he'd gotten from Nixon—they could neutralize the nanites keeping the others from leaving—but stopped himself. If they were being televised, it would be stupid to warn The Company of his intentions. Besides, he still hadn't decided on who he'd leave behind.

On the one hand, Touya had someone on the inside who had brought him a copy of the same holo-map the contestants had been using inside the arena, which had been a great help in finding the idiot and his team. So even if he left Lupa behind, there was a chance Touya could use his inside man to get her out. But if Touya realized that Kurogane had gone back on their deal, he could make it very hard for them to get to Syaoran.

On the other hand, if it hadn't been for Subaru's help, he would never have been able to get to the mage in time. It felt dishonorable to renege on their agreement after everything the younger vampire had done. Then there was the fact that these vampire twins had yet to go to the Witch's shop to get their means of dimension traveling. Acid Tokyo and everything else was still in the future for them. If he didn't help the vampire twins now, it might change their past, resulting in them either not getting out at all or refusing to save the mage's life later on.

He needed to speak with the mage before he decided for sure. Speaking of whom, the idiot had begun stir.

Fai jerked awake with a frightened gasp, eyes wide as his head swiveled around, searching for something before his gaze settled on Kurogane. Relief sparked in Kurogane's chest, and the knot of anxiety that had twisted around his heart loosened.
"Kuro— who are you?"
Crossroads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The annual event wasn’t doing anything positive for Yuui’s blood pressure. First there had been that splotchy, badly transmitted footage of the impromptu brain surgery his brother had insisted his teammate perform on him. Then there was the surprise attack by Ryanban, who had apparently been demoted from The Company’s Head of Security to a *Vampirosa* attack dog—though judging by the pair of chimeras Ryanban had under his control, someone high up in The Company’s hierarchy must have set him on Fai and his team. And then Ryanban had decided to torture Fai.

Sitting there in the VIP viewing chambers of the arena, barely ten miles from Fai, Yuui watched that bastard toy with his brother, dislocating both of Fai’s arms. The snap of his ribs was clearly audible in the chambers, and Yuui had felt his own heartbeat stutter. Subconsciously his hand had grasped for the beaded bracelet he always wore, feeling it saturate with a hum of energy. It would be so easy to blow up everything, his cover included. But there was no way he’d be able to make it to his brother in time. Strigoi was occupied by the chimeras, trying to fight them off and protect Lupa, who had gone down quickly during the initial attack. Of course, at the time, Yuui had had no idea why she’d been such an easy target. It hadn’t been until Ryanban had announced her pregnancy that the dots connected.

In hindsight, it all made sense but what difference did it make? His brother was dying, and he was completely helpless to stop it. Again. And then Primera had squealed and gushed about Lupa and his brother’s expected babies and their star-crossed romance and all that bullshit when all Yuui wanted was for the ditzy commentator to shut up and let him panic in peace.

Sometime during the ordeal, Bia had returned to his side with a glass of champagne and perched on the arm of his chair. It was difficult to maintain his air of nonchalance with the blood rushing through his ears. From the smirk on her red-painted lips, it was obvious she’d had a hand in arranging Ryanban’s encounter with his brother’s team.

_I could kill her right here._ Yuui barely refrained from acting on the impulse. He would be of no use to anyone if he got himself killed acting the emotional fool. _But she’s the reason Fai is suffering!_

It was a relief when Kuanos showed up and tore Ryanban off of Fai. Primera was chattering about close saves and the appearance of a previously unknown contestant, but Yuui had turned his attention to Bia, who looked as though someone had replaced her drink with lemon extract. She excused herself shortly after, and Yuui waited until she was across the room before he brought up the package purchase screen for sponsors. Scrolling through the various medical packages listed, he realized that despite Fai being given the anti-venom, Yuui had no idea what state his brother might be in after that amount of punishment. He didn’t even know if what he was about to do would be of any use to his brother. But he needed to do something. If only Kuanos had taken him up on his offer of help…

Logging in with Ashura’s ID, he purchased the Level 1 healing package and arranged for its delivery at the drop point closest to his brother. While waiting for confirmation on the delivery, he grasped his beaded bracelet again. Closing his eyes, he drew comfort from the familiar hum of energy contained within the beads. He could only hope that Kuanos’s arrival would herald the end of the surprises.

-0-
"Kuro—" For a heartbeat, Fai had hoped he would awaken to Kurogane's familiar frown. Instead he was disappointed to find a pale face with too-sharp cheekbones, a pointed chin, and a mop of dark, curly hair. In place of a familiar red, the eyes looking at him in concern were a Lupine amber. "Who are you?"

The Lupine crouching above him blinked in surprise, then spoke with Kurogane's voice. "Mage, it's me."

"Kuro-puu, you upgraded your face!" He could neither suppress the happiness that crept into his tone nor the wide grin he shot towards Kurogane. He was lightheaded with elation. "You could have waited for me before you picked a new look, you know."

"If you're babbling shit like that, I guess there's no brain damage." Despite the new face, the eye-roll was such a Kurogane expression, Fai couldn't find it in himself to pout. Even the proverbial sword hanging above their heads couldn't dampen the flutter of relief in his chest. Kurogane was there. Kurogane had come, so Fai wouldn't have to do anything else alone. As Sakura was so fond of saying, everything would be all right.

"I'm so glad you're here," he blurted out, noting with interest the new expressiveness of Kurogane's face. Kurogane was obviously pleased to hear it, despite the fond "idiot" he grumbled.

Fai turned to where Kamui was sitting with Madiha, who had yet to regain consciousness, and staggered to their side. Kurogane wordlessly followed. "How is she?"

"Stable for now," Kamui replied. "I've given her most of the antivenom, but she went down in the initial attack, so it's hard to say how much damage the venom might have done in the meantime."

"Oh." Fai glanced at Kurogane and realized he might need to make an introduction. "This is Kur—"

"I'm going by Kuanos," Kurogane interrupted.

"My my, Kuro-puu. New face and a new name. What else have I missed?" Kurogane crossed his arms, and Fai blinked. There blood pumping through the veins in both arms. But how could it...

His gaze caught the knot of scar tissue peeking out from under his shirt's collar. "You regrew your arm!"

Fai gave him a once-over and noted that Kurogane was wholly uninjured and in good health. Were you hoping he'd be injured? a voice that sounded suspiciously like Akira whispered in his head. Fai savagely tamped down on the jealousy that had wormed its way into his heart. He should be happy Kurogane had had an easier time than him. That he hadn't been held captive, tortured, or experimented upon. That he hadn't been forced into doing things against his will. I was the only one stuck in a never ending nightmare.

And they were happy to leave you here, Akira murmured. All three members of your so-called family left you in our clutches to rot.

"We need to talk," Kurogane said, interrupting his spiraling thoughts. He was frowning at Fai, and it took Fai a moment to realize that maybe that was because he had begun to tremble.

Fai plastered on a teasing grin. "Oh no, Kuro-puu, are you breaking up with me? Were you jealous that I slept with Madiha-chan? Don't worry, you will always be the daddy to our children."

"Mage, I'm serious. We need to talk. In private," he added, looking back at Kamui, who was making no attempts to hide his eavesdropping.
"We’ll only be a minute," Fai assured his sire as he moved away with Kurogane and summoned a privacy ward. The ease with which he cast the spell sent a rush of pleasure through his veins. His grin turned more genuine as felt the magic pulse beneath his skin, free in a way he hadn’t felt since before his arrival in Cavahall. Feeling eyes on him, Fai turned and saw Kurogane’s amber eyes studying him closely. Fai had no doubt he looked like a mess, covered in blood with his hair burnt in places from the scalpel and grinning like an idiot. There was no way Kurogane had missed his shaking hands earlier, but he hoped none of his negative thoughts had shown on his face. "When did you become a Lupine?"

“It’s a long story that we don’t have time for.”

Fai sobered. “What's wrong?”

"The kid is dying,” Kurogane replied. “The manjuu tried sending him to the princess, but something went wrong. It said the kid is stuck or something and it needs your help."

Jealousy constricted his lungs at the realization that the others had been together. Fai knew it was petty to feel that way. Of course they'd been together. Where else would they have been? Spread all over the city? It was just his bad luck that he'd been stuck in captivity for so long. Mokona would have led Kurogane right to Syaoran once the boy had escaped from The Company's hold. And besides, Kurogane was here for him now, wasn't he?

"You, Mokona, and Syaoran-kun were together?" Something must have slipped in his tone because Kurogane scowled.

"I found them a couple of days ago."

"Oh." Shame curled in his chest, tickling past his ribs and doing something unpleasant to his insides.

"Did you think we left you in here on purpose?"

"What? No. Of course not. Don't be silly, Kuro-puu." Fai couldn't bring himself to meet his gaze.

It was obvious Kurogane didn't believe him. But for once Kurogane decided not to call him out on his lie. “Listen, I’ve got something that can disable those explosive nanites of yours.”

Fai viciously stomped on the hope spreading its wings inside him. “Just mine?”

“You and one other. I figured since the vampire’s twin helped me find a way in here…” Kurogane trailed off meaningfully.

The fluttering of hope turned to claws of ice as Fai realized Kurogane's intent. The phantom thread connecting him to the deathcurse he'd cast on Madiha pulsed as a reminder of his promise. Of course. There was no way the gods would have been so kind to him. Not after the shit show that had been his entire life. Swallowing the painful lump in his throat, Fai shook his head. “I can’t go with you.”

“Mage, we don’t have time for theatrics.” Kurogane reached for his hand, and Fai stepped out of his reach.

“We can’t leave Madiha behind.”

“I can only disable nanites for two.”
“I made her a promise.”

“Mage, Subaru is the reason I even got to you in the first place. He… he saved my life.” Kurogane didn’t need to say much else for Fai to guess at the conflict in his heart. Then again, moral compromises had never lined up with Kurogane’s sense of honor. That was more of Fai’s forte.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t leave her.”

Kurogane growled, clearly unhappy with Fai’s insistence on rescuing Madiha. But there were no good choices before them. And on a level, Kurogane understood that. And Fai was glad to note that he respected Fai’s choice enough to relent. “Fine. I’ll disable yours first, and you can distract Kamui while I go and get hers.” He reached for Fai, who stepped out of reach once more. Now came the hard part.

Fai’s heart shriveled up with pain at the thought of what he needed to do. His next words were like razorblades that he had to force past his lips. “You can’t leave Kamui-kun behind either.”

“Didn’t you just hear what I said? I can only bring two of you.”

“Kamui-kun needs to go to the wishing shop with his brother. Tokyo is still in their future.”

“Mage,” Kurogane said slowly, "I came here for you. I’m not leaving without you.”

Eyes burning and chest tight, Fai looked away. “You don’t get to make that choice, Kuro-puu. Not this time.”

“What the fuck? Quit with the self-sacrificing act, you idiot, and let me—”

“She’s carrying my twins, Kurogane,” he cut in, hoping that the use of Kurogane’s full name would force the man to listen.

“—help you— wait, what?”

“Madiha is carrying my twins.”

Kurogane looked so flabbergasted that under any other circumstance, Fai would have laughed. “Twi— wha— Mage, what the fuck happened to all your lessons about using protection!!”

“It’s a long story, and we really don’t have time for it right now.”

“We can make some time for it. What the fuck happened?” Kurogane insisted, narrowing his eyes.

“Well, if you must know, Kuro-chii, when a man and a woman like each other very much—”

“Not that!”

“I thought you said you wanted to know.” Fai adopted an expression of innocent confusion, trying to hide his heartbreak behind a mask of levity, though Kurogane had always been scarily good at seeing through him. “We were both drugged. Things happened, and now she’s pregnant with my kids.”

“Shit.” Kurogane ran a hand through his hair as he looked between him and where Madiha lay, still unconscious. "Shit."

“You can’t leave her behind.” Fai wanted nothing more than to beg Kurogane to take him along. I
"don't want to do this alone, he wanted to say. Don't leave me here, he wanted to cry. But he couldn't be selfish. Or, well, he could. He was being selfish, forcing Kurogane to choose the other two over him when who knew how much trouble Kurogane had gone through to reach Fai in the first place. He suspected the Lupine infection was one of those things.

“I'm not leaving you, either.”

“Kuro-puu—”

“No! I’m not leaving you behind.” Kurogane grabbed his arm, just a little above the spot where Ryanban had grabbed him earlier.

“You don't get to make that choice!” Fai wrenched himself free from his grip and stepped away. He forced his expression to turn cold and distant. He had to do this. Kamui had to escape. They couldn't alter the past. And Madiha... Fai couldn't leave her or his children behind to become lab rats for Akira.

What about the deathcurse? whispered Akira’s sinister voice in his head, but Fai crushed the thought before it could take root. The deathcurse was a last resort precaution. Fai had no intention of going through with it until he saw Akira bearing down Madiha with his own eyes. And now that there was a better option...

"Mage, don't make me do this." Kurogane's voice was uncharacteristically soft, bordering on a plea, and it did something painful to Fai's insides. Kurogane never begged. Ever.

Gritting his teeth, Fai forcefully kept his back to the man. "If you ever cared for me, you will leave me behind and take her and Kamui-kun with you."

“And what about the kid?" Kurogane snapped in a tone that said he'd had enough. "He's fucking dying and the manjuu needs your help to save him!"

Fai stood where he was, the blood rushing through his ears and his heart pounding a staccato inside his chest. What about Syaoran? He needed to leave Cavahall before—

"A conduit spell," Fai gasped, finally turning back to Kurogane, whose frustration had given way to confusion.

"What?"

"You can act as my conduit," Fai answered almost feverishly as he traced out the necessary runes to construct the complex spellchain. The strings of his magic hung in the air for a moment before he directed them to Kurogane, watching as they sank into his arms. "When you reach Syaoran-kun, press both your palms to his chest and summon this spell. Just think of how you summon Ginryuu, but reach for this spell instead," Fai clarified. "I'll use you as my conduit to cast the spell that will help Mokona send all of you to Sakura-chan. She should be able to help him once he's away from Cavahall."

"And what about you?"

"Oh, you know me, Kuro-chi. I'll join you guys in Clow."

Kurogane frowned, staring at him for long enough that Fai thought he might have caught on to his bluff. In the end though, he sighed and looked away. "If you die in this place, I'll find a way to bring you back and kill you myself."
"Of that I have no doubt, Kuro-puu." Fai smiled as he brought down the barrier. It was funny how Kurogane chose to use the same threat that Kamui had less than an hour ago. Before Kurogane could think of anything else to say, Fai skipped over to Kamui and clapped his hands together. "So Kamui-kun, Kuro-puu here has agreed to take you and Madiha-chan back to the civilized world without the explosive problem."

Kamui frowned, glancing between him and Kurogane with open suspicion. "And you?"

"Oh, he's only got enough nanite disablers for you and Madiha-chan."

"So how will you be getting out?"

"Don't worry about me, Kamui-kun." Fai gave him a blinding grin. "I'll be fine. I'll—"

"Mage, there's something wrong with your girlfriend," Kurogane cut in, and Fai's heart sank. Kurogane was crouched next to her, observing her injured torso after peeling back the bandages. "She hasn't healed."

"Oh, that's okay." Fai nearly laughed. Of course, Kurogane probably didn’t know about her healing impairment. "Lupines in her condition don't heal as fast as normal."

"No, I mean she's not healing at all." Kurogane frowned, sniffing the air around her. "I can smell her dying."

Fai dropped to his knees beside Kurogane, checking her pulse, which was thready and faint. Her breathing was shallow, her skin cold to the touch. His holo-map pinged with an alert, but Fai couldn't bring himself to move. Kurogane was right. She was dying and they didn't have anything that could save her life.

"Guys, a sponsor just bought a level 1 healing package for our team," Kamui announced. Fai struggled to recall their briefing on various packages that a sponsor could buy for their preferred team. There was the level 4 healing kit that consisted of basic medicines and bandages, the level 3 kit that included some additional painkillers and IV drips, the level 2 that included antivenom and some low-level healing nanite injections. And the level 1 kit…

“That’s a heal-all, one time use deal, isn’t it?” Fai felt like he could breathe again as he turned to Kurogane. “Kuro-sama, you need to get rid of the nanites.”

“Mage, I—"

“Now!” Fai pulled out his holo-map and tapped on the notification alert. The healing package was being dropped a couple of miles north of their location. And two other teams were already moving in its direction. We need to hurry.

Kurogane pressed his hands against Madiha’s arms, his palms faintly glowing red. The process took a total of sixty seconds, and by the end of it, Kurogane was drenched in sweat and looked a little dizzy. “It’s done,” he grunted.

Fai wasted no time in picking Madiha up. Adjusting her securely in his arms, he looked between Kurogane and Kamui. “Get rid of the nanites for Kamui and meet us at the drop point. I’m going ahead.” Without waiting for an answer, Fai called on his vampire speed and darted in the direction of the healing package.
The long awaited reunion between Kurogane and Fai has finally happened. And yet, Fai had to give up his spot to save his team instead. Will he manage to reach the heal-all package in time and save Madiha and his twins? Will Kurogane do as asked and help Kamui or will he do what he’s always done and drag Fai along with Madiha, kicking and screaming? I’d love to hear your thoughts on all the developments in this chapter. Also, big news everyone. I now have an actual outline for the remaining chapters and I’m hoping I can get this fic wrapped up in ten chapters or so.

Also, what did you guys think of Kuro’s reaction to Fai sharing his big news about the twins? My beta and I both have this headcanon where Fai not only gave Syaoran and Sakura the talk, but he lectured Kuro about safe sex at multiple points in their journey (he gave him a refresher every time they landed in Nihon.) Unfortunately neither of us has the time to write a fic about that but if anyone want to run with the idea, I’d love to read about it.

* Another, slightly more comedic way this conversation could have gone according to my beta:

Fai: Just think of how you summon Ginryuu, but reach for this spell instead.

Kurogane, who has no background in magical theory and only understands Fai’s magic insofar as it requires runes and tends to make things explode: Wait, hold on, I don’t think this is a good idea.

Fai, full of conviction: No, this will definitely work. There is no possible way this could go wrong.

Kurogane: *sweats nervously* Uhhh…
Fai stopped at the edge of a clearing among the gnarled trees. The ground opened up in a shallow crater, equally exposed from all sides, and in the middle with her back turned towards him sat a tiny blonde, completely out of place. Fai moved around the crater until he was to her right saw the gleaming metal wrapped around her throat. It was a shock collar marking her as an Unnatural belonging to The Company's R&D department. Hands wringing the hemline of her bland dress, she looked at the tree line with an air of someone unused to being out in the open.

Fai consulted the holo-map. He was at the right spot, but what was the girl doing there? He frowned as something about the girl struck him as familiar but it wasn’t until she turned her head that recognized her. Wait... That’s Chii! Worry gnawed at his already frayed nerves. Why was Chii in the arena? Had the spell he’d cast so long ago to send her to Kurogane failed? Was her being there some form of punishment? He'd been so certain he'd helped her escape.

Scanning the tree line to confirm they weren’t being set up for an ambush, Fai slid down the incline and went to the girl. "What are you doing here?" he asked. Brown eyes blinked up at him without a trace of recognition. This wasn't the girl he’d tried sending to Kurogane. The twisting in his gut eased just a fraction. She must be one of the other clones Akira mentioned.

"Please use the proper procedure to request the use of a heal-all package."

Fai grit his teeth but managed to rein in his flash of anger as he set Madiha on the ground. “Berserker-224, requesting the use of heal-all package for La Lupa-420.”

“Request approved for one time use of heal-all package." Chii let go of the dress and peeled away Madiha's blood-soaked bandages to press her hands against the wound. Madiha made a sound in the back of her throat, too weak to be a groan, as the torn flesh started knitting back together.

Fai stepped back and turned to observe the tree line. There had been two other teams headed towards the crater, though Fai was certain he'd beat them there. Seeing no one around, Fai pulled up the holo-map to check on their progress. One member of the western team had left the other two behind and begun to move towards the drop point, while the northeastern team was still stuck in place, possibly fighting a chimera. The holo-maps weren’t programmed to show possible threats inside the arena, so Fai couldn't be certain. Kurogane and Kamui were also where Fai had left them, though he hoped that had more to do with Kurogane still recovering from disabling Madiha’s nanites.

A quick glance at Madiha showed the color returning to her skin, and the knot of unease loosened in his chest. Her breathing had eased, and her bloodless lips had turned back to their usual pink. Surprisingly, even the scars from the self-inflicted wounds on her arms had begun to fade. Satisfied that she was improving, Fai returned his attention to the holo-map: the northeastern team was still stuck in their spot, although the team to the west was less than a quarter of mile away. Kurogane and Kamui had begun to move, though their progress was slow.
"Fai?" His name was more of a croak, but when he turned Madiha already looked better than she had in weeks. Chii still had her hands pressed against Madiha's skin though, so she clearly wasn't done healing her, even if Madiha was trying to sit up.

"Hey." Fai grinned as he crouched next to her and helped her up, careful not to disturb Chii.

"What's goin—"

A branch snapped and they both tensed, scanning their surroundings. Fai spotted someone trying to sneak through the foliage though the bright blue of their clothes stood out vividly amongst the sickly green leaves. A glance at the map still didn’t show anyone nearby. A malfunction? Instantly on alert, Fai discarded the device and stood to face the newcomer stepping out of the trees, sporting a familiar uniform. Three feet from The Company's guardsman, a second man stepped to the edge of the crater. Fai readied a spell.

Were we set up? He was hesitant to attack unprovoked, lest it cost the team another penalty. But that moment of hesitation proved to be his undoing. Something pierced the air with a sharp whistle, quickly followed by the dull thwack of an impact with flesh. The choked gurgle behind him had Fai whirling around, only to spot Chii sprawled on the dirt, a gleaming quarrel sticking out of her throat. Her fingers made a grasp for the arrow but fell listlessly to the side as the life left her eyes.

Madiha had shifted into a low crouch, black bleeding into her sclera as she partially transformed and scanned the tree line, searching for their assailant. One by one, a dozen guards appeared from the foliage, all armed with guns. Madiha growled low in her throat as they took aim. Fai continued searching for the one who carried a crossbow and found no one.

The next attack came from his left. Fai called on his vampire speed to dodge the gleaming silver crossbow bolt. It embedded harmlessly into the dirt where he'd been moments before. Madiha dodged to the right, though she stumbled as she lost control of her transformation. A quarrel found its mark in her shoulder, and she screamed, crashing to the ground.

No! Fai flashed to her side, crouching to yank the bolt out, only to be struck in the stomach with another arrow. He knew it was made of Cerellium from the way it burned his magic, leeching the strength from his body as he failed to pull it out. Next to him, Madiha screamed again as a second bolt pinned her other shoulder to the ground. Ignoring the pain, Fai summoned a shield for protection, berating himself for not having done so right from the start, but the magic sparked and died at his fingertips.

A cackle pierced the air as Naba appeared halfway down the lip of the crater, crossbow in one hand and the arm of a golden-skinned teen in the other. The boy, no older than fifteen, wore a collar color-coded for the Pleasure Program. The moment she let of the boy’s arm, he scrambled back into the cover of the trees, turning invisible as he went.

Naba fired another shot at Fai. The bolt lodged itself into his thigh, scraping against the bone. At a snap of her fingers, two of Naba’s goons slid down the sides of the crater and dragged Fai up to her.

"Didn’t I tell you there would be consequences for betraying me, 224?" Her smile was sharp as a knife’s edge, tinged with insanity. She reached down to grab the quarrel sticking out of his leg and gave it a vicious twist.

Fai screamed as his vision flashed white, and Naba dug the bolt deeper into his leg. He struggled against the guards, almost pulling free until another arrow struck him. The guards let go and he crashed into the dirt, screaming out of anger rather than pain. His magic pooled around the injuries,
burning as it fought against the metal. He could tell it was bad. Maybe not as bad as paralysis by chimera venom, but bad enough to make his arms leaden with fatigue.

"Why does no one ever learn? First there was that bitch," Naba nodded at Madiha, who was trying to claw her way over to him, painting streaks of crimson on the ground as she did so. Naba watched her struggle dispassionately before turning her attention back to Fai, madness shining bright in her eyes. “Then there was my bastard of a brother. And now you. I’d expected better of you, 224. Was I not kind to you? Did I not provide you with a position most suited to you?"

"You tortured me," he spat.

Naba blinked, looking genuinely shocked before she grew livid as and kicked the bolt sticking out his leg. By the time his ears stopped ringing Naba was fending off a partially transformed Madiha. Uncaring of the damage she was causing to her own shoulders, Madiha moved like a woman possessed: a deadly combination of grace and strength as she tore through the two guards who moved in to help their mistress.

“Stay back. I can take her alone.” Naba yelled at the guards, circling Madiha who turned in place to keep Naba within her sight. “This bitch is mine.”

“Are you sure about that, Naba? I’m not wearing a shock collar this time,” Madiha hissed and Naba’s smirk slipped.

Fai pushed himself off the ground, but the small action drained the rest of his strength. He fell back with a groan as his eyelids grew heavy. Though his body was trying to heal itself, fighting the Cerellium took a lot of energy. Fai could do nothing more than watch as the two women pounced at each other. Madiha was hell-bent on clawing up Naba, though Naba for her part managed to hold her ground even as she was forced on the defensive. A swipe of Madiha’s claws nearly took off her nose, and as Naba tried to dodge, she lost her footing, smacking heavily into the ground. Madiha dove on top of her, her fingers squeezing Naba’s throat. A choking wheeze trickled past Naba’s lips as she bucked under Madiha, waist pinned beneath the Lupine’s knees.

"I never wanted the bite. I never wanted this life!" Madiha snarled. "I was just a child. That monster took everything from me! And you! I trusted you and you fucking stabbed me in the back!"

“You made a fool of me,” Naba said, her fingers scrabbling against Madiha’s.

Struggling against the lethargy, Fai reached for the bolt in his leg and gritted his teeth as his fingers grasped the blood-slicked metal.

“I thought you were my friend! Danish warned me not to trust anyone, but I still told you the truth!”

“They were lies,” Naba croaked as the guards scrambled down the slope to intervene. Fai hoped Madiha snapped her neck before they got there. Just one brutal twist was all it would take. He’d seen her do far worse.

“You dragged me into this hellhole.” Madiha tightened her grip until Naba’s eyes bulged. “All for something I couldn’t control.”

Madiha sensed the men approaching and snarled. “Come any closer and I’ll rip out her throat!”

Weapons raised, the guards inched closer until Madiha’s claws drew a trickle of blood. At an impasse, the guards stopped half a foot from where Fai lay, their attention focused on Madiha and
Naba. Finally having gained a firm hold on the quarrel in his thigh, Fai yanked it out just as one of the guards got the idea to use him as leverage. He pointed his gun at Fai’s head in warning.

“Let her go or I blow its brains out!” the man ordered.

Madiha’s gaze darted indecisively between her victim and Fai before she gave a wordless snarl and pushed off of Naba, landing in a crouch five feet away. Hackles raised, she watched the guards warily as they left Fai to help Naba stand. Gritting his teeth, Fai grasped the second bolt in his leg and wrenched it free. Madiha swayed from the blood loss and lost control of her transformation, giving the guards a chance to pounce. They kicked her legs out from under her and brutally shoved her to the ground even as she screamed obscenities.

“This is how you repay me, Maddy?” Naba demanded, her voice hoarse as she massaged her throat. Already the skin around her throat had begun to bruise. "I got you a spot in the Pleasure Program because I used to care. But you threw it back in my face, and now? You’re not even worth my time.”

With the Cerellium out, Fai’s injured muscles had begun to knit back together, though pain still sparkled along his leg when he tried to push off the ground as Naba stalked up to him.

"As for you, 224, I could have given you everything. You would have been great. But you're all the same. Ungrateful. Good for nothing. Treacherous.”

“You’re the traitor,” Madiha yelled.

"Shut up! Shut up!” Naba kicked Fai out of her way, and her foot collided with the arrow in his stomach, shoving it deeper. He nearly bit off his tongue trying to hold back a scream as she stomped over to Madiha. “I don’t want any more of your lies!”

Breathing shallowly through his nose, Fai reached for the bolt with trembling fingers. He wanted nothing more than to curl up in a ball and not feel any more pain. But when in his life had he ever gotten what he wanted? Grinding his teeth, Fai grasped the bolt with bloody fingers, trying to find a way to hold it without his hands slipping.

"Creatures like you need to be taught their place." Naba waved the crossbow as if to emphasize a point, "Halfway ready to pop, aren't we, 420?” At her signal the guards holding Madiha down flipped her onto her back. "I guess it's straight to the Breeding Program for you."

"No..." Madiha gasped as she began to struggle anew.

"I'll drag you there myself if I have to," Naba promised. "And once I'm done with you, I suppose I'll track down my errant brother and make sure his death sticks. Can you believe he went and changed his face just to hide behind his silly Liberalist girlfriend? I always knew Kurogane was a coward deep down."

"Kurogane?" The name drew Fai’s attention, though the context took a moment to register. His Kurogane had always been an only child, but apparently Cavahall’s version had Naba as a sibling who had ultimately killed him for some perceived betrayal. Whoever he’d been, it must have been important enough to cause his Kurogane to alter his features and take on a new identity. Though from the looks of things, news of 'Kurogane's' survival had reached Naba all the same.

"And you, 224." Naba turned her attention back on Fai. "You really shouldn't have pissed me off." She pointed the crossbow at Madiha’s stomach. Madness shone in her fever-bright eyes, dripping from the grin that split her lips, and all thoughts of Kurogane went flying out the proverbial
window.

Fai screamed. "Stop!"

"Akira would be just as happy with dead specimens as she would with live ones." Naba pulled the trigger.

No!

The world crashed to a halt as the arrow left the crossbow. Fai’s dwindling reserves of magic exploded in a wave cerulean power, dissolving the quarrel still in his stomach. The universe wavered for a fraction of a moment, and within that eternity, Fai took in every detail, from the blood soaking into the ground around them to the beginnings of surprise in Naba's expression, from Chii's body lying abandoned like a rag doll to Naba's minions firing their weapons, from the smoke curling in the air to the solitary quarrel and the gleaming Cerellium bullets heading for him and Madiha.

Within that moment, world snapped into focus beyond the cerulean haze of his magic, and Fai pushed off the ground. A thread of energy shot from the swirling aura of blue surrounding him, disintegrating the bullets before it snapped to the arrow headed for Madiha and vaporized it.

Naba snarled, chucking her crossbow at Fai to pull out a gun. She fired and Fai stepped to the right. The bullet whizzed by, harmlessly embedding in the dirt behind him. Madiha screamed in pain, and he saw Naba's minion stomping on the arrow in her shoulder to keep her down.

White hot rage bubbled within Fai’s chest.

Mine!

He moved as if in a dream, disconnected from time as magic sang beneath his skin. Naba fired again, and Fai flung away the bullet with a flick of his wrist. He wrenched the man off of Madiha and tore out his carotid artery. The gush of warm blood splashed on Fai's tongue, rejuvenating him. He let go of the corpse as the second guard attacked to cast a wordless curse and a lump of flesh collapsed at his feet, missing every bone in its body. Fai strode over it, crushing the thing beneath his boots. The world was alight in shades of gold shot through with the cerulean of his magic, though his gaze was focused solely on Naba. Two more guards tried to intercept him and were turned into clouds of crimson vapor with a twitch of his fingers.

They were mine!

Naba’s smile had faded as she retreated, moving up the incline until Fai conjured a barrier behind her and she crashed to a halt. A twist of his hand turned the barrier into a dome of pure magic, crackling with energy as the stench of ozone filled the air. She aimed her gun at his chest, and Fai shot forwards, slicing through her weapon and three of her fingers with his claws. Time sped up with Naba’s cry of pain as she clutched her injured hand to her chest.

Fai grinned at the naked fear in her eyes.

“Y-You… stay back!” she screamed, darting out of his reach. Fai let her. There was nowhere for her to run.

“You were right about one thing, Mistress!” Fai spat the final word as he stalked towards her.

“You were right about one thing, *nothing* like humans.”

He flashed to her left and sliced her left arm all the way to the bone. Naba screamed as the injured
limb went slack, blood gushing to the ground. Like a cat toying with its prey, Fai let her stumble away. And then when she was the farthest she could get from him inside the barrier, he put on a burst of speed to stab his claws through her thigh.

“Stop! You can’t do this to me!” She staggered away, leaving streaks of crimson in the dirt. A whiff of iron mingled with the ozone, but for once, the blood held no appeal for him.

“You shouldn’t have hurt what was mine!” Fai snarled as he slashed through her other leg. Naba collapsed with an agonized scream. "You’re proud of being human, right, Mistress?"

"No..." Naba’s eyes blew wide in horror.

“And you love the Pleasure Program,” Fai added with a thoughtful tilt of his head. "It would be a pity if you couldn't work there."

He stalked after her, eyeing the woman as she dragged her body across the ground using her uninjured hand.

"No..." Naba whimpered, inadvertently reaching the spot where Madiha was leaning against the barrier, a broken quarrel clutched in her hand. "M-Maddy, you- you have to stop it. Tell 224 to l-let me go and I'll— Maddy, please, it will listen to you..."

"His name is Fai," Madiha said. She slammed the quarrel through Naba's outstretched hand, pinning it to the ground. "And only my friends can call me Maddy. Last I checked, you aren't one of them."

Fai whistled and chains of blue wrapped around Naba's limbs. A flick of his fingers had her on her back, spreadeagled. A short whistle ground the bones in her hands and feet to dust. Naba howled, but Fai’s attention was drawn to her minions stranded outside the barrier. They were all trying to bring it down by shooting at it, but his swirling magic disintegrated most of the Cerellium bullets upon contact. The few that made it through lost enough momentum to harmlessly plink on the ground under their weight. Even so, he could feel each impact on the shield in his bones as blood trickled down his nose. He wiped at it, succeeding only in smearing it across his face.

"Maddy, would you like to do the honors, or should I?" There was a time when Fai would have been horrified by his own actions but after everything, that part was silent. He was tired and angry and he’d had enough of being afraid for himself and his loved ones. There had always been lines he’d never wanted to cross, but after all the time spent in The Company’s captivity, they’d blurred to a point where he no longer knew where they were. And at that moment, he didn't care.

"Honestly?" Madiha partially transformed to bare her canines as she watched Naba squirm and whimper before shaking her head to look away. "She's not even worth my time."

"N-No... No! Maddy, please!" Naba screamed.

Fai watched Naba struggle and let out all of the negativity he'd felt in Cavahall. He drew out his helplessness and draped it across his shoulders like a cape. He pulled on his fear and shrouded it around him like armor. He called on his anger and wielded it like a spear. He let the emotions harden his heart as he traced out a disfiguring curse that shot at her torso. She screamed as her skin broke out into angry red boils that burst and drenched her shirt with pus. They would leave behind scars when they healed. Ignoring her fear, Fai crouched in front of Naba and dragged the claw on his forefinger across her right cheek, carving through the skin, and watched the blood ooze out of torn flesh.
"Did you know," he said as he slowly dragged his claw across the left side of her face, "any injuries sustained before a vampire transformation remain behind even after the body has healed?"

Fai sliced his wrist and pressed the bleeding wound against her mouth. Naba screamed as the transformation began, her body straining against his magic.

"Now you can be the breeder," he spat as he moved to help Madiha to her feet. Slinging her arm across his shoulders, Fai turned them away from Naba. On the other side of the barrier, amidst a pile of dead guards, stood—

"Kuro-sama! Kamui-kun! You guys made it!" He dropped the barrier spell, jutting his chin in a way that dared anyone to comment on what he'd just done.

"You two okay?" Kurogane asked instead.

"I've never been better, Kuro-puu." Fai grinned, and if his smile felt a little plastic, Kurogane let it slide. "How are you feeling?"

"I'll be fine." Kurogane glanced between him and Madiha, his gaze lingering on Fai's hand where it was wrapped around her waist.

"In that case, I suppose another round of introductions is in order," Fai said. "Madiha, this is Kuro-puu. He's a close friend and currently your and Kamui-kun's way out of here."

"Just ours?"

"He only had enough nanite disablers for two," he answered, ignoring Naba's whimpering behind them.

"So you gave me yours?" Madiha sounded so incredulous, Fai couldn't help the indignant look he shot her. She moved back and crossed her arms. "What? I thought you'd use your deathcurse instead to keep your spot."

"I promised to get you out, didn't I?" Fai asked, unwilling to admit that he might have briefly entertained the notion.

"You also promised to kill me when the time came in return for an assurance of no more suicide attempts," she reminded him.

"Yes, well, that time isn’t now." Clearing his throat, he turned to Kurogane. "I don’t want any more surprises, so I’m going to send the three of you to uh… where was it that you were headed to? No, no, wait. Don’t say it out loud. We don’t want you guys to be followed. Picture the destination in your mind and I’ll do the rest."

"Mage, think about what—" Kurogane started to say, only to sigh and shake his head. "There’s no changing your mind, is there?" Fai was glad to note that for once Kurogane had respected him enough to let his decision stand, even if he didn’t seem to like it. Besides, now that the nanite disablers were spent, there was no way Fai could leave with them anyhow.

"Afraid not, Kuro-sama."

Kurogane frowned the way he did when he knew Fai was lying. "You better meet us in Clow."

"Or I’ll have an angry Big Doggy coming after me?"
“I mean it, mage.”

“I know.”

“You better not die.” His refusal to take Fai at his word meant that Kurogane, at the very least, suspected his true intentions and was trying to remind Fai of his promise to value his life.

“I won’t.” He smiled, unsure if he could keep that promise. The Company would be out for Fai’s blood, no doubt wanting to make an example out of him for what he’d just done to Naba while being broadcasted live. Fai didn’t want to give them the chance to torture him to death.

“It’ll make the princess cry.”

“Can’t have that now, can we?” he agreed. Sakura would have Syaoran with her though. She would be okay in the end. If nothing else, Fai intended to survive long enough to help the boy get back to his princess.

“Right.” Kurogane cleared his throat as he looked around awkwardly. “How does your spell work?”

“Kamui-kun, Madiha-chan, grab hold of Kuro-puu while he pictures your destination in as much detail as possible,” Fai instructed, and Kamui hastened to obey. He cast the spellchain that he’d used only once before in Cavahall. That time, he had anchored the destination to Kurogane’s aura. This time, the anchor would be something inside Kurogane’s head.

“Fai, I—” Madiha broke off, tensing as Fai stepped up and pulled her into a hug.

“Take care of yourself, okay?” he murmured.

“I won’t let anything happen to the twins,” she promised, as she relaxed and returned the hug.

“No, I mean take care of yourself,” he repeated and something like a smile flitted across her lips as she nodded. Standing on the tips of her toes, she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek.

“Stay safe, okay?”

“You better be there in Clow, mage,” Kurogane repeated once Madiha had returned to his side. Unable to lie again, Fai settled for a nod as his spellchain encircled the three. Wisps of shimmering smoke coalesced inside the ring of his magic, dissolving their bodies wherever it touched them. The iridescent cloud hung before him momentarily before it collapsed in on itself. Fai kept the smile fixed on his face until the last of his magic had vanished.

Behind him, Naba gave a tired groan and Fai turned to see that her transformation had ended. Just as he’d told her, her wounds had all scarred over, leaving behind deep gouges with no hope of ever being healed.

Fai turned his back on her and picked up the holo-map he’d discarded earlier. He turned it on and saw that the member of the western team was hiding out of sight just beyond the tree line.

“I know you’re there,” Fai said, glancing in the direction of the hiding spot, hoping things wouldn’t come to another fight. He could feel the beginnings of a headache.

“Berserker! You’re looking good.” Roy grinned as he stepped up to the lip of the crater and slid down the incline to reach him. Unlike Fai, who was covered in blood, Roy had a few scrapes and bruises. There was some blood crusted in his hair and dried on the side of his face, but that
appeared to be the worst of his injuries. He made a show of looking past Fai and let out a whistle when he spotted the sobbing wreck behind him. “Damn, is that Naba?”

Fai didn’t even spare her another glance as he dismissed the last of his magic holding her down. “Nope. That’s a new breeder for The Company’s Breeding Program. Where’s the rest of your team?”

“Gone. Same as yours, I suppose?” Roy answered as though he hadn’t already seen Fai send them away.

Fai’s head had begun to pound something awful, and he was quite certain he would be crashing from the mix of adrenaline, magic, and blood lust. Given what he’d just done, he had no doubt that The Company would retaliate soon. His display might have bought him a little time, but he couldn’t afford to show any signs of weakness.

Turning to Roy, he quirked a brow. “Would you like to form an alliance?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Roy grinned and slung an arm across Fai’s shoulders.

"Kill me,” Naba croaked as they walked away and started climbing back up the crater’s wall.

“No, wait! Kill me!” she cried, her screams growing louder and louder, echoing through the clearing for a long time after they were gone.
Yuui sat frozen in stunned disbelief. Fai was under assault from Naba and her men. The bitch just shot his brother again! And as she shoved the arrow deeper into Fai's thigh, the live feed cut off, citing technical difficulties. *That's bullshit!*

His fingers dug into the leather armrests as he stared numbly at the blank screen. He couldn't shake the image of Fai's face twisting in agony. His vicious howl as Naba shot him in the leg rang in Yuui's ears over the infuriating chatter of his fellow viewers. He wanted nothing more than to yell at the bastards to shut up. Couldn't they see the bitch was about to kill his brother? Yuui was going to fail him, again, and the last image he had of his twin would be of Fai collapsing like a marionette with its strings cut off.

In his mind's eye, a ten year old version of his brother lay superimposed over the image of Fai crumpling to the ground, body riddled with Cerellium bullets as the supercharged prayer beads rolled across the blood-drenched floor. Yuui was once again the little coward who hid in the wardrobe and watched from a crack in the door as his brother sacrificed his life. He remained rooted as the beads began to glow an ominous gold and The Company's assault team retreated, picking their way across the corpses of the sixteen orphans who had taken shelter in that abandoned building with the twins. Seventeen corpses and a coward in the closet.

The beads rattled as the energy trapped inside escaped in a series of brilliant explosions. Not a single member of the assault team made it out the door. Yuui remained hidden inside the wardrobe, protected by the accursed blood that flowed within his veins. While the bodies and his surroundings were reduced to nothing more than ash and charred remnants, he'd remained unscathed. Long after the fires had died out, he had uncurled from the fetal position and picked his way across the ruins, collecting seventeen of the black prayer beads.

Clutching at the bracelet around his left wrist, he drew comfort in counting the number of beads. Seventeen. A prayer for each life his cowardice had cost. The heat seared into his palm and grounded him in the present. From the corner of his eye, he saw Director Borson abandon his plate and navigate around the artfully placed sofas and armchairs. He joined Director Shen, who stood waiting near large decorative pots holding a variety of exotic plants. Director Mora made her excuses from her seat next to another guest and scurried over to join the men. Bia was next as she, too, left the man she had been entertaining to saunter over to them.

The Directors pushed aside the fronds hanging above the entrance to a concealed passageway and stepped through. Forcing his limbs to move, Yuui got to his feet and strolled across the room to slip after the directors.

The passageway led to lavishly decorated private accommodations: meeting rooms and a few offices set up for guests of The Company who didn't wish to make a daily commute between Cavahall and the viewing stadium to watch the matches. Considering the fact that the stadium was set up inside the arena with border markers and holographic projections to keep it concealed from the gladiators around them, many of the guests considered their stay to be an all-expense paid vacation. Though of course there were those who considered the final event to be a good opportunity to conduct business and make deals while enjoying themselves. Either way, not only could the elite view the matches live, they could enjoy the thrill of being close to the danger from the comfort of a luxurious stadium. In addition, the entirety of the pleasure program docket was also available for their enjoyment at night, free of charge.

The sounds from the viewing hall were eerily muted on the other side, though he could hear raised
voices coming from a meeting room at the very end of the hall. Doors lined either side of the
hallway at equal intervals, with small darkened alcoves in between that either held large potted
plants or marble statues. As quietly as he could, Yuui approached the meeting room and hid behind
a decorative plant placed across from the partially closed door. The leaves concealed him from
immediate view as he crouched behind a chest-high terracotta pot. And if he shifted the leaves just
so, he could see into the room through the gap in the door.

The directors had pulled up a holo-screen above the conference table, with Bia standing between
Directors Borson and Shen and across from Director Mora. Their attention was momentarily
focused on the ongoing encounter between Fai, Lupa, and Naba. The live stream in the viewing
chambers had cut off when Lupa had attacked Naba, but now he could see Lupa being shoved face
first into the dirt by the guards. Naba stood by, massaging her throat and glowering at the Lupine.

"How do we know this isn't your doing?" Director Mora spoke up, her question drowning out
whatever Naba said.

"For the last time, Mora," Bia stalked up to her fellow director and blocked Yuui's view of the
screen, "I had nothing to do with the shitshow going on up there."

"What about the encounter with Ryanban?" Director Shen asked. Yuui shifted out of his crouch,
trying to see past Bia and failing.

"That was for drama. The ratings speak for themselves."

"Going with that logic, this would make for some great drama, wouldn't it?" Mora again, and Yuui
found himself agreeing. If this was Bia's doing, Yuui was going to burn her alive, regardless of Fai
surviving his encounter with Naba.

"Oh please." Bia scoffed. "Naba is an embarrassment to us out there. It's a good thing the techies
cut off the live feed when they did. Can you imagine how this would have looked if Lupa was
shown strangling her on a live broadcast? You think I would sanction something this risky?"

Would have been brilliant if Lupa had succeeded. Yuui bit the inside of his cheek as Bia walked
back to Shen's side, letting Yuui see the view screen. Naba kicked the arrow deeper into Fai's
stomach and pushed him out of her way in favor of marching over to Lupa, gesturing wildly with
her crossbow. I'll kill her, he vowed, digging his fingers into the beads of his bracelet and trying to
take comfort from the familiar burn of energy.

"After what you did to Danish for exposing you, I don't think it sounds very far-fetched."

"I sincerely hope you have some proof to back up your claims, Director Mora." Bia smirked when
the woman remained silent. "I thought so. Now, for the final time, I did not have anything to do
with Naba ambushing that team. So maybe if we could move past the finger pointing and onto how
we will deal with this?"

On the screen, Naba turned her attention back to taunting his brother. Yuui's heart sank when she
pointed the crossbow at the swell of Lupa's stomach and Fai screamed for her to stop. Naba was a
sadist. Fai's begging would only make her more determined to—

She fired the crossbow, and a wave of blue exploded out of his brother. Yuui barely managed to
not give himself away as the meeting room fell silent as the magic shrouded Fai in a visible aura. It
was an ability unheard of outside of legends of old, and yet Fai's magic acted as though it had a life
Tendrils of energy reached out and disintegrated the arrow and the Cerellium bullets long before they reached their targets. A chill skittered down Yuui's spine as he watched Fai effortlessly decimate the guards accompanying Naba. His brother tore out the throat of the one pinning Lupa down before turning another two into clouds of blood. Cloaked in an otherworldly aura of blue, drenched in blood with his feral, catlike eyes, his brother looked for all the world like a demon.

Inside the meeting room, the directors looked equal parts horrified and fascinated as they watched Fai cut off Naba's fingers and then toy with her as she scrambled away. When he grinned, Yuui could completely understand why the ordinary humans of Cavahall feared Unnaturals. Fai looked terrifying, seeming to enjoy Naba's fear as she screamed at him to stay away. Playing with the beads around his wrist, Yuui wondered if this was truly the man his twin had grown up to be.

"You were right about one thing, Mistress!" The growl only added to the demonic quality of his brother's appearance. "Vampires are nothing like humans."

It was like watching a train wreck happen in slow motion. Yuui couldn't look away as his brother methodically mutilated her. Naba begged Lupa for help, only to receive an arrow through the hand for her trouble. Not that that surprised Yuui. When the Shah family had first been caught in the scandal of harboring a Lupine, it had been rumored that Naba was the confidant who had betrayed Madiha Shah to The Company. What wasn't widely known, however, was that after stripping her of her identity, Naba had wanted the Lupine as her plaything in the Pleasure Program. When not drugged to a stupor, Lupa had kept on attacking anyone who dared come close to her, and after months of failing to train her, the directors decided to put her aggression to better use in the Gladiator Program.

Yuui watched, transfixed, as his brother pressed his bleeding wrist to Naba's lips and with it, sealed his fate. Everything else could have been forgiven... well no, that was just Yuui lying to himself. The directors would have wanted to make an example out of Fai for daring to go against his betters the moment he fought back against Naba in a televised match. But they might have chosen to keep him alive. Maybe they would have transferred him to their R&D department or the breeding program once they'd been finished with his punishment. Both places from which Yuui might have been able to rescue him. Hybrids were rare enough for The Company to want to keep him alive. But transforming one of The Company's employees into an Unnatural... death was the only punishment they would accept now.

"Naba was a talented young woman." Director Borson muted the holo-screen and turned to the other directors. "We could have kept her in the program even after all of that. Such a pity that it mutilated her before the transformation."

"Yes, a true loss for the Pleasure Program," Bia said after a beat had passed. On screen, Strigoi and Kuanos had shown up and now stood around calmly talking with his brother and Lupa, as though Fai hadn't just signed his own death warrant. Yuui wanted to scream at them to get the hell out of the arena. That had been Kuanos's reason for wanting Yuui to act as his sponsor in the first place. Even if that plan had failed, the man had found a way to get to Fai without Yuui's help. But now, instead of standing around and wasting time, Kuanos had to grab his brother and get the fuck out of there before the directors decided on a course of action.

"I suppose our new breeding stock will need to be collected from the arena," Director Shen said after a beat.

"Akira will be more than happy to have that arranged," Director Mora agreed. "Surely, we won't let this act of defiance stand. I say we send out a kill-squad and deal with this issue before Berserker
can infect the other gladiators with its dangerous ideas of rebellion."

Bia scoffed. "Sending out a kill squad will be too obvious. I've got a better idea on how to deal with 224."

Director Shen, who had been watching Fai hug Lupa with mild fascination, perked up and faced Bia. "Oh?"

Their voices lowered and Yuui cursed under his breath. He would have to sacrifice his hiding spot in order to hear their plan. Slipping out of the shadows, he crept closer to the door just as Bia pulled out a chair and sat down at the head of the table.

"— introduce a new reward system," Bia was saying. "Whoever manages to kill Berserker and his team will—" Bia broke off when Strigoi, Lupa, and Kuanos turned into an iridescent cloud under the effect of Fai's spell. As the smoke vanished, taking the three with it, Yuui wanted to scream, or better yet blow something up.

The one person he'd been so eager to rescue, and Kuanos left him behind?! Yuui's blood pounded in his ears. Why the hell did he leave Fai behind? The sheer idiocy of Kuanos's actions, especially when he'd refused Yuui's help in favor of some secret plan... Yuui should have never let Kuanos have his way.

"What did it just do?" Shen sounded fascinated.

"I've seen this before," said Bia as she frowned at the screen. "Berserker has sent them away."

"Did it forget about the range limiters?" Borson quirked a brow.

The range limiters. Of course... Yuui almost hit himself. Hadn't Nixon mentioned he had been working on nanites that could disable the range limiters? Kuanos had grabbed Lupa and Strigoi, which meant that the disablers worked. So why? Why had he left Yuui's brother behind, unless...

"According to Dr. Akira's reports, it had a way of disabling the original explosive nanites," Mora replied. "It must have found a way around the experimental versions she devised to keep it contained."

If Nixon's disablers hadn't been compatible with the experimental versions, that could explain why his brother had been left behind. Or maybe Fai had chosen to stay behind himself? If that were the case, there was still a possibility Yuui could help him where Kuanos had failed. He only needed to find a way to sneak into the arena and track Fai down. Which wouldn't be an issue for Yuui, given the fact that he was already inside the arena. He only needed to sneak out of the viewing area and into the area cordoned off for the gladiators. It would be risky, but perhaps he could use another disguise to keep his identity concealed. Although, before he made any such plans, he needed to know the directors' course of action.

"At first, I had truly believed that Berserker could be a good asset to The Company," Director Borson sighed. "Unfortunately, the longer we let it live, the more I'm forced to consider Berserker a liability. What did you have in mind, Director Bia?"

Bia cleared her throat. "I suggest we set up a new reward system. Whoever kills off Berserker gets a shot at qualifying for the final round of the tournament, regardless of the status of its team."

Yuui had to admit it was a clever plan, even if it sent his heart racing. If such an announcement went through, The Company wouldn't even need to sacrifice any manpower in taking his brother down. Not that they'd be eager to send in more of their men after Fai's display of power. If it gave
the remaining gladiators a way to bypass the rule of keeping their team intact for grand finale
qualifiers, they would take it. And the desperate ones were always the most dangerous. Without the
rest of his team around, Fai would be hunted by the remaining contestants, until he either managed
to kill them all or someone else got lucky.

Yuui couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let the directors pass that order. Even if it meant that he
had to—

His spiraling thoughts crashed to a halt when the cold muzzle of a gun pressed against the back of
his head.

"Hands in the air and step away from the door," ordered a man's voice.

Yuui hastened to obey, cursing himself for losing track of his surroundings. He'd spent years in the
lion's den with his cover intact, avoiding detection even when he spied on them, and now…
Disappearing people was always such a messy business. With the directors only a few feet away
and the rest of the spectators just down the hallway...This isn't going to be easy.

"Good. Now turn around." Yuui obeyed, coming face to face with a smirking Kyle Rondart. The
man had a gun pointed at Yuui in one hand and holding a collar in the other. He held it out for
Yuui. "Mr. Ashura Veda. My, this certainly is a surprise. Put this on if you don't mind."

"What gave me away?" Yuui drawled, making no moves to take the collar. The conference room
had fallen completely silent behind him.

"Oh, I hadn't suspected you in particular," Kyle replied in a casual tone. Just behind him, a young
Unnatural knelt on the ground, eyes closed, hands splayed across the plush carpet. A glance
towards the conference hall showed a hazy bubble surrounding the door. Kyle had had the child
cast some sort of barrier to contain the sound. "A source tipped us off that a sympathizer might try
to sneak someone into the tournament by sponsoring them. When the tightened security measures
failed to catch anyone, we suspected they might try something else. I was keeping an eye on all of
our guests, and you certainly weren't acting like yourself today."

"And the collar?" Yuui nodded at the item, still refusing to take it as he debated the pros and cons
of trying to fight the man right there in the corridor.

"Just a hunch." Kyle smiled. "I know you're trying to decide if you can take me on, so let me save
you some trouble. Not only do I have a gun pointed at you, but 531 here has orders to drop the
barrier the moment you try to attack. And I'm quite certain you don't want the directors knowing
about your presence here."

Kyle was good at reading situations. Yuui had to give him that much.

"The collar, if you please, Mr. Veda," Kyle repeated. Seeing no immediate way out, Yuui sighed
and grasped the cool metal. When it remained cool in his hand instead of heating up, Yuui heart
sank in trepidation. This wasn't an ordinary shock collar. It was made of a Cerellium alloy. If he put
it on, Yuui would be completely at Kyle's mercy.

Kyle must have seen something in Yuui's expression because his grin widened.

"What do you want?" Yuui asked.

"Oh, just wanted to have a chat," Kyle said, still completely relaxed, though he did motion with his
gun for Yuui to put the collar on. Having no choice but to obey, Yuui grasped it with both hands
and hesitantly lifted it to his throat where it locked with an ominous click.
Kyle led him to a room three doors down from the conference room, that was set up like an office. 531 followed silently behind them and cast another privacy bubble the moment the door was shut.

"It was Riza Hawkeye who scanned you when you first registered for our services, was it not?"

"I beg your pardon?" The random question threw Yuui for a loop. Kyle put away the gun and hopped on to the table.

"Yes, I remember now, it was definitely Hawkeye who scanned you." Kyle nodded to himself, adjusting his glasses as he did. "You never gave another scan after the initial one. Naba mentioned that you raised quite a bit of a stink over one of our newbies asking you to follow procedure when you came to visit Xing Huo last time."

"And your point is?"

Kyle laughed as he pulled open a drawer and withdrew a scanner. It was hard not to flinch at the sight of it. This was bad. This was very, very bad. "My point is that unlike your registration form claims, you aren't human, are you?"

There was no good answer to that question. But Kyle didn't seem to be looking for a response as he continued.

"I'm sure you're already aware of Hawkeye's status as a Liberalist plant. In the couple of years that she worked for us, she skillfully sabotaged a large number of our operations. Not to mention, she sneaked an Unnatural onto our client list. She was one of your most successful agents, I'll admit." Still smiling, Kyle picked up the gun and set down the scanner in its place. Hopping to his feet, he made a grand sweeping gesture. "Now then, Mr. Veda, it's time to see what you truly are."

Yuui glanced at the gun held casually in Kyle's fingers to the scanner lying innocently on the cherry wood tabletop to the Unnatural kneeling beside the closed door. The collar buzzed in warning against Yuui's throat, a subtle reminder of his helplessness. If only he hadn't gotten so emotional back in the hallway. When Yuui remained rooted to the spot, the collar delivered a jolt of electricity, making him yelp. Kyle continued to smile and watch him expectantly. Gritting his teeth, Yuui walked up to the table and pressed his hand against the scanner. The glass surface was cool beneath his clammy palms, though it immediately lit up and displayed the percentage for the ongoing scan. It was an agonizing three minutes later that the scanner beeped in indication of the scan completion and Kyle gestured for Yuui to step away.

Watching the man study the results displayed on screen, Yuui finally broke the silence. "Are you going to turn me in?"

"Hmm?" Kyle didn't look up as he tapped away on the screen, no doubt logging away the information from the scan into The Company's database.

"I said, are you going to turn me in?"

"Not just yet, Mr. Veda. What am I saying? The original Ashura was a hundred percent human so that's not even your real name."

Yuui frowned. "What is that you want from me?"

"A few answers would be nice. For instance, you are not Ashura Veda, yet you still look like him. Shape-shifting is not listed under your Unnatural abilities, so how did you manage such a convincing disguise?"
"Experimental nanites."

"And what happened to the original?"

"He had an unfortunately explosive accident," Yuui replied, crossing his arms.

"I see." Kyle set the scanner aside. "Care to give me a demonstration of these nanites?"

"No," Yuui answered curtly and received another shock from the collar. Unlike the warning jolt he'd received before, Kyle didn't let up until Yuui was on his knees and gasping for breath.

"Would you like to try again?"

Digging his nails into the plush carpet, Yuui complied even as tears of humiliation and fury stung his eyes. When he'd lost Fai, he'd vowed to never be so helpless again. And yet here he was, once again at the mercy of someone else. *I won't let it stay this way for long,* Yuui vowed as his skin tone changed from tan to a pale white, the hair hanging loosely around his face shifting from black to a sunny gold. He looked up to glare at the man. *He's not getting out of this room alive.*

Kyle, for his part, seemed genuinely stunned as Yuui shed his disguise, though he regained his composure quickly.

"Isn't this interesting." Pocketing the gun, he moved around the table and grinned wickedly at Yuui. Kyle sat down and gestured for Yuui to join him. "I believe you'll do nicely for what I have in mind."
The spell deposited them in Emeraude's office, just outside the kid's room, as Kurogane had pictured it. He would have preferred to land right next to the kid, but he didn't want to risk the mage's spell reacting with the spells keeping the kid stable. He spotted Emeraude crouched by the filing cabinet, her claws extended and poised to attack, though she relaxed upon seeing Kurogane.

"Kuanos, I had not realized that you would be arriving directly at my office."

"How's the kid?" he asked, ignoring her unvoiced demand for an explanation.

Emeraude frowned, throwing the tiniest of glances towards the hidden staircase.

"What happened?" he growled, pushing her out of his way before grabbing the filing cabinet.

"Kuanos, wait!" she called as he revealed the passageway and stomped down the stairs. The lights flickered to life as soon as he entered the room.

It was empty.

_The kid's not here!_ He whirled on Emeraude, noting that Kamui and Lupa had also followed them. "Where is he? What did that bastard do to the kid? _Where is he?_"

"Have care of how you speak to her." Kamui’s eyes flashed to vampire gold as he took a step towards Kurogane, fangs bared. "Lady Emeraude is an elder of our coven. Show her some respect, Kuanos."

"It is all right, little one," Emeraude said before Kurogane could turn on him. "He is only worried about his friend."

Kurogane's attention was drawn to Lupa's labored breathing. Between her healing being impaired
and the blood loss, she was on her feet through sheer stubbornness. Under any other circumstance, he would have immediately taken a liking to her but with the sliver of resentment curling around his heart, he couldn't bring himself to care. It was obvious she was moments away from falling flat on her face. But so what? It was because of her that Kurogane had had to leave the mage. He’d done everything just to get the idiot back and... he’d fucking left him behind!

Gritting his teeth, Kurogane forced himself to change the direction of his spiraling thoughts. He needed to focus on the present. The kid was dying and Touya decided to play mind games with him? If the bastard thought Kurogane would play along, Kurogane would punch the bastard’s teeth out. As though summoned by thought alone, the alpha appeared in a cloud of dark smoke with Souma by his side. Kurogane’s skin itched at the sight of the bastard who grinned and spread his arms wide in welcome.

"Kuanos! You're back, I see." Touya made a show of looking around, his gaze lingering on Lupa, who seemed too out of it to notice the new arrivals. "Where's your hybrid friend? He didn't get seriously injured, I hope."

"As if you didn't see everything on screen," Kurogane spat, clenching his hands to keep himself from hitting the bastard. "Where's the kid?"

"We have no idea what happened," Touya replied.

"They cut off the broadcast soon after Naba showed up," Souma added hastily.

"The mage decided to stay behind." Kurogane came to stand next to Lupa. "I got Lupa like you asked. Now where the hell is the kid?"

Touya’s voice gained a silky quality as he spoke. "I’m glad you remembered our deal."

"What the fuck did you do with my kid?" Kurogane moved to stand in front of Lupa when Touya started approaching them.

A flash of irritation passed across Touya's face, though he quickly masked it with a genial smile. "Relax. We moved him to an isolated room. Strigoi's brother and that white rabbit thing are with him."

"Why the fuck didn't you say so?" Kurogane growled, absently scratching at the inside of his arm as he stepped out of the way and Lupa finally seemed to notice Touya's presence.

The change in her demeanor was instantaneous as black bled into her sclera and she bared her teeth. "You!"

"Hello, little sister." Touya tried to embrace her only to be shoved back with a snarl.

"I'm not your sister, you fucker!" Unleashing her claws, Lupa leapt for the bastard's throat. Kurogane barely managed to grab and pull her away before she could succeed. "Let me go! I'm going to kill him!" Lupa's claws raked across Kurogane's forearms. He gritted his teeth. "I'll kill you!"

As much as Kurogane wanted to let her do that, the bastard still hadn't told him where the kid was. The isolated room could be anywhere in the compound, and he'd rather not waste time trying to find the boy.

Kamui and Emeraude, watched them from the other side of the room. Souma had turned to smoke and was circling the room, most likely looking for an opportunity to grab either Lupa or Touya.
Lupa cut him off with a howl of rage. She thrashed in Kurogane's arms, straining to claw off Touya's face. A hint of alarm wormed past his resentment as Kurogane noticed how cold and clammy Lupa's skin was growing the longer she struggled. Kurogane hated that he was worried for the Lupine when she was the reason the mage wasn't there with him. Her struggles grew weaker even if she showed no signs of relenting. She's going to hurt herself.

"I'm a lot more'n upset." Her voice dropped in volume as her words grew slurred. "I was six. I was just a child and- and you fuckin' bit me. I'm gonna... 'm goin'to kill—" Lupa went limp in his arms.

"Shit." Kurogane lay her on the ground.

"Get Masooma! And bring Freya with her!" Touya ordered as he dropped to his knees next to Lupa. Souma vanished without a sound. "Damn it... This is not how I imagined our reunion to go," he muttered as he put pressure on the bleeding holes in her shoulders.

Kurogane looked from the deluded scavenger to the unconscious Lupine, watching the way her pulse fluttered beneath her skin. Her breathing was shallow and labored, though she didn't look any worse than she had when the mage had raced off with her in the arena. The itch spread from his arms to his chest though Kurogane refrained from scratching himself.

"You piss off everyone you meet?"

"It's a talent." Touya's flippant tone only made Kurogane hate him that much more.

Emeraude appeared with a medical kit and shooed them away. "I would appreciate it if the two of you were not here while I looked at my patient. I haven't forgotten the last time you two were together, and Lupa won't survive an altercation like that."

Kurogane scowled. He almost pointed out that he hadn't initiated those fights but thought better of it. After all, he had been the one to start their confrontations. But was it really his fault that this Touya was such an asshole?

"Why the fuck did you bite a six year old kid?" Kurogane asked once they'd moved to the other side of the room and watched Emeraude tend to Lupa.

"Mostly for revenge," Touya said, unashamed as Kamui joined them. "The elites took my sister from me. Their guards hurt her over and over again to keep me in line until one day they went too far. They caved in her skull. But somehow she didn’t die from it. Being a Lupine, what didn’t kill her… well she healed like every other time. But the scarring in her brain led to an irreversible coma. So I killed the soldiers, took the Cerellium mines and the scavengers with them. And then I hit the elites back where it hurt."

Kurogane growled. "So you went after an innocent child. Your so-called revenge ruined her life."

"What's one life in return for the thousands that the elites have ruined?"

Kamui glanced between the two of them, clenching his jaw to hold back whatever comments he had.

"You want Lupa as a trophy to rub in the elites' faces, don't you?" Damn it. Kurogane did not want to feel sorry for Lupa. He wanted to stay pissed at her. Wanted to let the resentment in his heart fester, and here the bastard was making him feel sympathy for her. This is all levels of fucked up.
"I do care for her," Touya insisted, and even Kamui looked dubious. "Everyone that I share the gift of my bite with becomes my family."

"By that definition, she's my family too," Kurogane pointed out and for the first time that evening, Touya looked alarmed.

"What are you getting at?"

"If she doesn't want to stay here with you, she won't have to." The mage had stayed behind so that she could have her freedom. Kurogane would be damned before he let this greedy bastard make that sacrifice be in vain. Especially when he was already berating himself for leaving Fai behind.

A part of him understood the mage's reasoning for staying. Kurogane knew why, but he didn't like it. He knew now that Fai had no intention of following tem to Clow. The idiot's fake smile as they’d said goodbye had given him away. Kurogane had held on to hope until then, but the idiot probably didn't think he could make it out of captivity alive. And that only added to rising despair curdling in his chest.

Kurogane should have done what he always did and hauled the idiot out of there kicking and screaming. But he knew what had stayed his hand: the desperation behind Fai's mask of stoicism, the unspoken promise that there would be no forgiveness for Kurogane this time if he refused to do as Fai had asked. The self-sacrificing idiot would rather his children and their mother live in his stead.

Well if the idiot believed he could just blackmail Kurogane into rescuing Lupa in his place and then just die... He better believe Kurogane would find a way to reach into the afterlife to strangle the bastard himself.

Touya growled and advanced on Kurogane. The wolf whimpered in Kurogane's head, but without the transformation, he had enough control not to give an outward reaction to the bastard. The itch spread to his back and crawled down his spine. "If you think you can just come in here and tell me what I can and cannot do—"

"You'll what? Kill me, brother?" Kurogane spat the term like a curse and was satisfied to see Touya bristle. He narrowed his eyes in challenge. "I'd love to see you try."

The brewing fight was interrupted when Souma reappeared in a puff of inky blackness, Masooma and Chii in tow. Masooma motioned for Chii to go speak with Emeraude while taking stock of their surroundings. As soon as she spotted them, she rolled her eyes.

"I should have expected another pissing contest," she muttered as she stalked up to them. Souma hung back, watching the proceedings with an air of exasperation. "You three, out. Souma can fetch you once we're done here."

"And I would like to see Subaru." Kamui piped up.
Masooma let out an impatient huff and conjured a barrier between them before she headed back to Emeraude. For a moment it seemed that Touya might try to attack the barrier to bring it down, but in the end he turned and motioned for them to follow him. They headed up the stairs, out the cottage, and down a cobblestone path. It was late in the afternoon but the moon was already a silver disk rising beyond the horizon. The itching had spread all over his body and Kurogane dug his nails into the palms of his hands to keep from scratching.

*Why the fuck did they move the kid out here?* Kurogane wondered as they headed towards the mines. Much to his surprise, Touya led them straight past the entrance and down a narrow dirt track that ran alongside a series of fence markers at the very edge of the Scavenger's compound. They came around a bend in the road hidden by dense shrubbery and stopped in front of a stone building. It looked like some kind of outpost, though judging by the number of wooden crates piled around it, it was being used as a storage area. Touya knocked on the door, and a short while later, a black haired, red-eyed girl the same age as the kid answered.

"Has there been any change?" Touya asked as she let them in.

"Not since the last time you were here." The girl shook her head. "Who is this?"

"You already know Strigoi. This is Kuanos, and Kuanos, this is Meiling. She has been taking care of Syaoran in your absence."

"You're the dimension traveler, right? Did you manage to free Berserker?" she asked as she closed the door behind them and Kurogane almost sighed in relief as the itching lessened. Not wanting to look too closely into the reason for that just then, Kurogane turned his attention to scanning the sparse room. It only had a wooden table and a few chairs placed next to a dozen wooden crates. Beyond the crates were two closed doors and a short hallway.

"Where's the kid?" Kurogane asked instead of answering her question about Fai.

"This way." Meiling turned and led them to a third door at the end of the hallway. When Kurogane made to open it, however, she reached out to stop him. "I wouldn't go inside if I were you."

*Like hell I wouldn't.* Kurogane shrugged her off and yanked the door open to march inside. A blast of scalding air greeted him, and he staggered back with a hiss. The skin on his cheeks stung as he squinted into the room. "What the fuck?"

The kid was cocooned in an incandescent mass of magic, blood, and floating black goo. Charred remains of a couple of chairs and what appeared to have been a bed were strewn about the floor. Smoke and soot stained the peeling paint on the walls and there were cracks in the glass of the solitary window directly across from the door.

"He started doing that shortly after you left," Touya said as he stepped up behind Kurogane. "A day later, shit got weirder and well... We barely managed to get him out of there before that thing surrounding him hurt anyone."

"I thought you said Subaru was with him," Kamui said as he looked through the door once and turned to Touya.

The alpha shrugged and gestured to one of the rooms they had already passed. "He's in there with the rabbit creature."

Kamui had flashed to the door and was inside before Touya had finished speaking. Kurogane half-expected the manju to come hopping out of the room any instant; a part of him wanted to seek out
the familiar comfort of having the creature close to him. The Kurogane that had been banished by Tomoyo all those years ago would have scoffed at him for wanting such a thing, but after the time he’d spent in Cavahall, he couldn’t find it in himself feel ashamed for it. Heart beating faster with every step he took, Kurogane was strangely disappointed at the lack of Mokona’s high-pitched cry of ‘Kuro-puu’.

The room was dimly lit, Kamui’s silhouette outlined by the glow of crimson runes that encircled a solitary cot. Back stiff and hands clenched by his sides, Kamui stared down at his injured, unconscious brother. Next to Subaru’s head, resting on a pillow, was Mokona. Like Subaru, the meatbun was badly injured, its white fur charred and matted along the burns that covered its body. Subaru bore similar wounds on every visible part of his flesh.

The itching returned full force, skittering along his bones as the despair that Kurogane had been pushing back since leaving the mage behind returned with full force. The despair mutated into a rage that burned through his blood.

“What happened?” He wasn’t sure if the growl issued from his mouth or Kamui’s. All he knew was that if Touya had had anything to do with it, Kurogane would tear the bastard to shreds.

“They volunteered to help us move Syaoran out here once he began to float and burn everything around him. Your rabbit stabilized Syaoran long enough for them to get here, but they both had to touch him for that. The burning ball surrounding him took its toll on those two.”

Meiling took over the explanation as she came up to stand beside them. “Masooma looked them over after they collapsed. According to her, they’re both in a healing coma. Freya refused to come anywhere near here to heal them, and every time we tried moving them, they started having seizures. In the end, Masooma cast the stabilizing spells,” she said, gesturing to the runes surrounding the bed, “and we’re hoping their accelerated healing can take care of the rest.”

Kurogane’s heart sank as he stared at the unmoving manju. The blood pounding in his head made it impossible for him to think anything beyond a simple, ‘We’re so fucked.’

The spell that Fai had cast on him would be of no use without the manju, and who knew how long it would be before it awoke? The mage had made it sound so urgent that they send Syaoran away from Cavahall. A burning lump settled somewhere past his throat as he grit his teeth. Could they even afford to wait for however long it took the manju to awaken? I should have just brought the mage here.

Numbness crept along his arms and thighs, stinging like a thousand needles embedded just beneath his skin. They hadn’t planned for any delays. Damn the idiot for forcing him to take Lupa along. Fuck!

Someone touched his shoulder and Kurogane nearly clawed off their head as he whirled around. Souma only managed to survive by turning back into a cloud of inky smoke and rematerializing near the doorway.

“No need to kill the messenger.” She held up her hands in mock surrender. “I only came to tell you that Masooma has finished healing Lupa, and she’s asking to see you.”

“The healer?”

“No, Lupa.”

Bitterness and resentment turned to poison in his veins and Kurogane turned back to the manju. “I
don’t want to see her.”

“I’ll let her know.”

He waited until she was gone to look around the room, finding no sign of Touya or Meiling. Kamui had moved to sit on the other side of the bed, hands firmly wrapped around his brother’s. Scratching at his wrists and the insides of his elbows, Kurogane leaned against the wall and tried to think of a way to help them.

The mage used to make fun of him for wanting to solve all his problems with violence and a sword, but Kurogane had never been good with magic anyway. The only thing he could do were the rudimentary forms he used when applying his family’s techniques. Beyond that, he could only trigger spells that Fai cast on him. There was nothing for him to physically whack away at and make everything better, no enemies to fight, no demons to slay, no monsters to destroy. The kid was dying, the mage was beyond his reach, and the manju was comatose. Kurogane was completely helpless.

If only the mage had come along. The idiot would have known what to do. If nothing else, he would have been able to contact the wishing shop. Kurogane hated having to rely on the power of wishes, but at that moment, he would have given up almost anything in return for saving his family.

He didn’t know how long he stood there watching over the manju and failing to come up with a solution but the sound of commotion outside the door drew him out of his spiraling thoughts.

“Where is he?” Lupa demanded from the other room. “Kuanos!”

Growling, Kurogane stomped over and made to lock the door, but before he could, Lupa wrenched it open. She was missing her glasses, her greasy hair was matted with blood, and she was looking at him completely wild-eyed. “Good, I found you.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” Kurogane snarled and tried to slam the door in her face. Lupa held fast, not budging an inch. “Go away.”

“I don’t care. I have plenty to say to you,” she snarled back. Kurogane tried shoving the door closed once more, only to be met with more resistance as she stuck her foot in the doorway. His blood turned to ice when she screamed. “They’re going to fucking kill him!”

“What did you say?” The itch was near maddening now as though something inside him was struggling to be let out. He wanted to claw through his flesh just to get it to stop. Barring that, he wanted to break something. Just... just get rid of the— but wait... this was more important. He had to pay attention. Gritting his teeth so hard his jaw hurt, Kurogane turned his focus back on Lupa.

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“I just saw the broadcast. The directors, they’ve—” She gasped, throwing her whole weight into keeping the door open, and it was then that Kurogane realized he had still been trying to push her out. He let go and she stumbled inside, nearly falling flat on her face as the door swung wide open. “They’ve just confirmed a kill-order for Fai.”

Fury surged through his body and Kurogane gave in to the urge to hit something. His fist slammed into the wall next to Lupa’s head, punching straight through a foot and a half of stone he sent a cloud of dust and shrapnel flying into the air. Breathing hard, Kurogane pulled out his hand and realized he’d pulverized his knuckles. But then his Lupine healing kicked in and the muscles and bone swiftly mended. So Kurogane howled and punched through the stone a second time. His third attempt was blocked by Lupa grabbing his wrist, so Kurogane snarled and wrenched free of her
grip.

She’d done this. This was all her fault! And for that he would kill her. Silver moonlight spilled across the floor from a solitary window and something inside him snapped as the wolf took over. He transformed.

Teeth bared, he snapped at the female’s throat before she leapt back with a yelp. Ears flat against his skull, he scratched at the stone with his claws and crouched. The female shifted into the wolf-not-wolf state. Growling low in his throat, he leapt for her, snarling in annoyance when the female dodged out of his way. Her scent was unusual and it prickled at something in the back of his mind but the wolf didn’t care. Wide-eyed, the female turned on her heels and shot out the room, so he gave chase. They raced through the corridor, past funny smelling crates that made him want to sneeze and out into the open.

He raged and he clawed at the female, who was always a second too fast for him to truly injure. She snarled and snapped back at him, though every time he struck out, she dodged and stuck to the defensive, taking special care to shield her stomach. There was something wrong with her. He sniffed, once again catching a whiff of that strange scent surrounding her.

*Cubs… Family… No hurt.* The wolf tried to recede as the realization struck but Kurogane refused to come out. He was fucking tired of dealing with this shit. It was like losing mother and father all over again. A numbing haze had enveloped his mind, and Kurogane didn't want it to end. He couldn’t…

The wolf slumped to the ground and let out a long mournful howl. It howled and howled, its cries echoing around the hillside as the wolf mourned.

"I'm so sorry." A warm hand pressed against his muzzle as the female, once again in her not-wolf form sat down beside him.

“I know you resent me for being here in his place,” she said, and the wolf whimpered in agreement. She pulled back her sleeve and showed him a bare arm. There was a whiff of ice and electricity about her skin, familiar. The wolf whined. “He cast a death curse on me, promising he would kill me when I asked… I asked, and instead of doing what he’d promised, he sent me here with you. I don’t know why he didn’t do it. He had the perfect opportunity, and yet he let me live.”

They sat in silence for what felt like an eternity. The moon travelled through the sky and began dipping towards the horizon when Kurogane finally worked up the energy to end his transformation and look at the woman sitting beside him. “He’s a liar,” Kurogane said in the end, “and you were a fool to believe him.”

*What does that say about you?* whispered a sinister voice in the back of his mind.

“He never had any intentions of escaping, did he?”

“No.”

“Too bad for him.” Lupa crossed her arms with a scoff. “I have no intention of letting him get killed.”

“And how exactly are you planning on saving him?” Kurogane narrowed his eyes. Madiha met his gaze unflinchingly.

“My brother can disable his nanites.”
“If he could do that, why the fuck did he leave you in that place?”

“It was different with me.”

“How?”

“A combination of blackmail, family politics, and his position on the board tied his hands. Even if he did help me escape, I would have had no place to go. I sure as hell wasn’t coming to hide with the monster who ruined my life. And the Liberalists… well, let’s just say offering me shelter would have caused an all-out war between their faction and The Company. Tomoyo and Kurogane are all about helping the Unnaturals victimized by The Company, but they’re also pragmatic about it.”

“What made you so special?”

“I’m Madiha Shah.” She gave him a wry smile, though it did little to mask her self-loathing. “Source of everlasting shame for the elites and the biggest controversy of this century. I’m too prominent.”

“And the mage isn’t?”

“After what he did to Naba?” There was that self-deprecating smile again. “I probably should have been the one to bite her. Maybe the directors wouldn’t have ordered a hit on him then.”

“You think your brother would help us rescue him when he’s one of the people who ordered the hit?”

“Oh, no. Danish had nothing to do with that order. I checked with the healer witch, and he’s still out of commission. Director Bia tried to have him assassinated after he brought her actions against Fai and me before the rest of the board.”

The treacherous hope sparked a little flame in Kurogane’s chest as he met Madiha’s unflinching gaze. “You got a way to contact this brother of yours?”

“Not yet,” She stood up and dusted off her clothes before offering a hand to Kurogane, “but ask me again in a few hours.”

Though he had no need of her help in getting up, Kurogane took the proffered hand and was strangely relieved by the smirk that spread across her lips.

Maybe, there was a way for Kurogane to save his family after all.

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