Home

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Summary

How Sojiro Shimada and Taeko Nakano fell in love, lived, and raised two of the very best boys. Despite the circumstances, they tried to put family first.

(Not essential to have read the previous entries in this series, as this is the prequel to all prequels)

Notes

CW for grief, character death, miscarriage mention (non-graphic), and implied violence, overall happier than it might sound

See the end of the work for more notes
Sojiro slips out onto the terrace and exhales in the chilly dark. Another of his uncle’s birthday celebrations run too long, too loud, and too drunk. His parents already excused themselves to bed, leaving him to stick around and play host until everyone goes home. At least they're having fun, maybe he is boring after all.

He shuts the door behind him, locking away the party's distant echoes. The ban on indoor smoking imposed by the intermittently-visiting historical restoration experts nets him fifteen minutes of boring, provided no one interrupts him. No sooner does he get it lit than he hears a low voice a few feet to his left. “Are you hiding out here, too?”

It takes a moment to recognize her, leaning against a wooden post in the pale light, her own cigarette dangling from red-stained lips. Old Nakano’s daughter. They had been formally introduced some years ago, his mind still stuck in the self-absorbed spin cycle of university, but he recalls her name as Taeko. Her mother had died overseas due to some kind of seizure, the child barely escaping the early birth with her life. For all he had been chastised for marrying a woman twenty years his junior, Nakano seemed legitimately heartbroken and had never so much as entertained the idea of remarrying, leaving Taeko as the sole heir to his profitable pharmaceutical business.

Certain members of their circle treated that as the set-up, the punchline being that his daughter had grown up exceptionally tall, broad and masculine in frame, and excessively plain in features. She seems self-aware at least, they would sneer. Rarely attending any events in Hanamura’s crowded social calendar, though frequently seen out with her father when they’re not away visiting the company's foreign production branches.

“I wouldn’t say hiding,” Sojiro offers a faint smile, eyes catching on her as she bends to uselessly flick her lighter, weak sparks crackling up. Shiny black hair in a tight bun at her neck. A sheer black dress nearly reaching her ankles with a slit up one side that exposes lean, muscular legs. Her shoulders would make an athlete envious, hunched though they are. He slightly hates how automatically he sizes people up but then, he didn't notice her in the first place. He must be slipping.

“What would you say, then?” One side of her mouth returns his smile, continuing to flick the lighter, her bare arms tightening against the autumn air.

“That I’m temporarily making myself scarce,” Sojiro hums and takes a drag. Every interaction here is transactional, a series of complex signals to be observed and appropriately returned according to coded rules. Something in the nonchalant tone of her voice, the lack of posturing and angling for his favour, the normalcy of it, strips that away, if only briefly. He holds his own lighter out. “May I?”

“A distinction without a difference,” Taeko quips back, flashing a grin and dropping the useless object into her red leather purse. “And yes, please do.”

He steps forward, old wood creaking under his feet. She pushes off the post and bends to close the distance between them, her fingers around the yellow filter and his held up to shield them from the nighttime breeze. Her closeness allows him a glimpse of her eyes and he's suddenly struck- Dark, shimmering brown and such bottomless depth to them, so large and compelling beneath long eyelashes. The kind of unreal beauty they ascribe to characters in fantasy novels-

A thin lock of her hair falls down, catching on the flame and sending an acrid smell up between them. A few curses are shouted as their hands fly up to extinguish it, leaving the end of it burnt to rancid ashes. She clutches it between her fingers as he profusely apologizes. “-So sorry, I am so incredibly sorry. I’ll buy you a new one, I assure you-“
She blinks at him. “You’ll buy me a new hair?”

His tongue sticks behind his teeth as his cheeks flush hot, hands hanging in mid-air as their cigarettes smolder at their feet. “Er- well, I meant- maybe if we find some scissors-“

An uproarious, throaty laugh startles him, not even remotely contained by the fist she holds to her mouth. After a moment of her cackling and him staring like a fool, she pinches the burned bits away and tucks the lock back behind her ear. “No need. The look on your face is repayment enough.”

His cheeks continue to burn, juvenile and humiliating for his twenty-five years. She dips to grab the lighter, fishing another cigarette out of her purse with the same hand, then reaching into the package in his jacket pocket and tugging one free. She turns it towards him, holding it expectantly between her fingers, and Sojiro dummely takes it in his teeth before he can think better of it, his lips grazing her knuckles.

Taeko smiles, full and roguish, those intensely lovely eyes dancing as the moonlight washes over the garden beneath them. She lifts her own cigarette to her mouth and the lighter between them, bending close to him once more. “Let’s try this again, shall we?”

Talking at the party itself, or any other local function, is akin to sending state secrets by postcard. They scribble down phone numbers and make arrangements just outside the village walls, occasionally in private restaurant booths but more often in windowless hotels that he knows indirectly— from hearing too much on his mother’s lap as a child— are frequented by his father’s brothers, and now his cousins. The thought leaves a sour taste, but it can’t be helped and is quickly put aside.

He had taken a few other girls to similar establishments in university, having the fun he was expected to and trying to shed his innocence as quickly as possible, as was the aim of most of his male peers. The encounters were short-lived, enjoyable enough after the first few attempts. But when Taeko makes love to him, he’s overwhelmed. Pushing each other against walls and laughing loudly when they struggle with zippers. The conversations afterwards are so easy, open in a way he’s never allowed himself to be. He lets himself get pulled under and immediately knows how much trouble he’s in.

“Are they trying to set you up with anyone yet?” Taeko asks, staring at the ceiling of an almost disconcertingly blue room, an aquarium flickering and bubbling behind the headboard.

“Not that I’m aware,” Sojiro mumbles against her neck, one arm around her waist and their legs tangled together, joints turned to jelly. “The men in my family tend to marry late, but I’ll imagine they’ll get nervous with me soon.” They have reason to, he thinks as he presses his lips together. “We have time. I’ll book a nice restaurant, I’m sure they’ll like you-“

“How sure?”

The silence spins out as she takes a long drag, blowing the smoke away from his face. “You’re hardly unsuitable. Besides, I’m an adult, I’m capable of deciding these things on my own. They know that.”

“But suppose I’m not what they have in mind.” The hand tangled in his hair begins stroking, so gently with the sharp edges of her long gel nails. “What will you do if they say no? They might make you choose.”

Sojiro’s throat tightens, his thick eyebrows knitting together. “I would choose you.”
“Would you, really?” There’s not a trace of resentment, only understanding. They’d spoken of their burdens with ease, knowing the score too well. “Leave everything and live in obscurity, with me? My father wouldn’t be able to do business here anymore, if that’s how things played out.” Another deep drag. “And I won’t be your mistress, either. Least of all for the sake of whatever poor girl you might get stuck with.”

“I wouldn’t ask that of you,” he keeps his eyes down, avoiding the steady gaze she aims at him. “To be honest, either choice seems impossible to me. If it comes down to that, I- I don’t know what I’ll do. I really don’t.”

They’re quiet for a time, and he rolls onto his other side, mind awash in static and arms folded against his chest. He feels a draft as she moves to stub out her cigarette, twitching in surprise when she presses against his back, warm and impossibly close. “How much longer do we have the room for?”

He squints at the glowing red numbers on the alarm clock. “Two more hours, almost.”

“Let’s leave the world out there a little longer, then.” She pushes up on one hand, tilting his chin up for a somewhat awkwardly-angled kiss. So soft, but always drawing so much from him, playing him like an instrument and leaving him more dazed than he ought to be. It’s hard to feel anything but, looking up at her tender smile, the two of them shielded by the curtain of her loose hair. “If this is all we get, I don’t want to waste any time.”

“Agreed,” he nods, frown brushed away by her lips. His arms wrap languidly around her back, their bodies curling against each other until some peculiar mechanical noise sounds from the aquarium, startling them enough for their teeth to click together.

“Why is this even here?” She glares accusingly up at the fish, looking adorable with her hair all in disarray. “Do you think there’s an exhibitionism fetish but with animals instead?”

“I feel like I already know the answer and I wish I didn’t.” They crack up, made ridiculous in each other’s arm and purposefully oblivious, for at least a little longer.

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It’s not a restaurant, but the Shimadas' formal dining room, likely the grandest and nicest place to take a meal in the whole of Hanamura. If she got knocked on the head, she might believe she had time-traveled back to the Heian era, with only a few pieces of modern furniture and the electric lights to disrupt the illusion.

Sojiro manages to talk shop well enough between her father and his, as ritualized and polished as a stage actor, though she can spot the sweat gathering at his temples. She can’t blame him now that they’re all seated so closely together. The current head of Hanamura's lifeblood seems much too wheezy and fragile for a man in his late fifties. A carefully stolen glance at his ankles when he steps away to use the restroom confirms her suspicions, gleansed from medical courses she'd taken in college to better understand the family business. Heart failure, most likely. Whatever it is, it will likely lead to Sojiro stepping up much earlier than any of his predecessors had.

What a shame, he seems a pleasant man, if a bit reticent. More tolerable than some of his relations, at least. Their clan is prolific and not as collectively keen on dignity and respect, at least when removed from the public eye.

Sojiro’s small, owlish mother is quiet in a different way, her default expression being that of a passenger staring out the window on a long flight, though she puts on a splendidly false smile. Each
question carefully scripted, asking “Oh, what a sweet young lady, what will your father ever do without you?” and really meaning "Do you expect to bring him here?"

“His eldest sister and her family are planning on moving in soon, they don’t much care for where they live now, and our home has much more space.” Taeko answers with a pleasant smile and a careful sip of the imported wine. “I know you can’t afford a daughter-in-law with split responsibilities, or a liability in the home of all your secrets. Never fear.”

The tennis match continues for all of dinner, and she would pity Sojiro playing two-on-one if she didn’t know the only thing he had to do to impress her father was speak kindly to her and his mother, his natural inclination. He would greet news of her engagement with a hearty sigh of relief and no further comment, she was certain. His sisters often commented that they were one spirit in two bodies, and they weren’t entirely wrong.

After polite good-byes are exchanged, Taeko leads her father out to the car, absolutely dying for the burn of some well-deserved nicotine, only to realize he’s forgotten his eyeglasses. “Oh for- sorry, I’ve got a mind like a sieve these days. I’ll just-”

“It’s alright, Papa. Stay here, I’ll get them,” she squeezes his arthritic hand and slides back out of the car. A warm spring leeching into an early summer, at least it’s a warm walk through the front courtyard to ring the bell. One of the house staff greets her and ushers her into the foyer while they fetch the forgotten spectacles. She stands with hands folded, silently and girlishly wishing that she might have been able to steal a kiss off those handsome lips before she left.

“Has he asked yet?”

Taeko slowly turns to meet the gaze of the man who has hints of Sojiro in his smile, his hair all white. “Not in so many words.”

The elder Shimada grumbles, much the same noise her father makes when the phone rings in the evening. “I’ll tell him to get on with it, then. He’s going to need you.”

She gets the formal question that night on her personal line, the two of them talking until the sun comes up and muffling their laughter like kids. The engagement ceremony takes place the following month, with all the pomposity and lavish gifts that the families’ wealth allows. Sojiro insists on riding with her back to her home, her father having tapped out as soon as the fuss and food was over.

He settles into the black leather seats after closing the screen between them and the driver, sighing contentedly. “Your aunts seemed happy for us, I thought my ear might fall off.”

“Not quite,” Taeko chuckles, tapping her ashes into the tray between them. “They’re happy with you, they’re positively livid with me.”

Sojiro frowns curiously, so youthful in his expressions. “What for?”

“Because,” Taeko pauses for an inhale. “If my father died with me still unmarried, they know damn well that no matter how much he’s taught me or how many hours I’ve put into that place, not even a janitor would listen to a word I say. One of their sons would have to take over to keep it in the family. They were counting on that.

“But by marrying you, it will become ours, and eventually our son’s. Bringing the company under your banner will mean more bonuses to go around, more promotions for their husbands and more prestigious opportunities for their children, so they love you. But they know what they lost by writing me off too soon, so they’ll be pissed at me for a long time yet.” Taeko’s smile turns sharp and
cat-like, not showing teeth. “I’ve never accounted for anything less. I’ve always know my value, and
my price.”

Sojiro nods slowly, suddenly subdued, and turns to watch the city go by in silence. A stab of pain
shoots through her chest at how resigned he looks. She moves to correct his misunderstanding,
dropping her vice in the ashtray and turning his face towards hers. “This doesn't mean I love you any
less. We both have long games to play, but you've never been a part of mine. The way—” A lump
stops up her throat and she forces it away, her hands slackening on his jaw. “The way you look at
me is more than I ever let myself hope for. We’ll build an empire together, but at home- at home, I
only want us to be a family.”

She catches the surprise in his eyes and feels a twinge of guilt for putting it there, but then he kisses
her in that sweet, hungry way of his. His grip on her as powerful as it is vulnerable, always wanting
but noticeably withdrawn, nearly shy. She smiles against his neck as the streetlights flicker across
them. She would not have him any other way.

The wedding is fit for royalty, the guest list a mile long, and neither of them accustomed to being the
centre of attention in this way. Taeko always anticipated her father spoiling her and she can’t
begrudge him any of it, the tears standing in his topaz eyes worth all the fuss and frills in the world.
The Shimadas’ insistence on doubling his contribution would seem ostentatious if she didn’t have a
suspicion they were making up for the second son they’d lost in infancy, the one she isn’t entirely
sure she's supposed to know about.

She escapes her gaggle of female relations briefly in the reception hall dressing room when they
scatter to handle some catering disaster. Sojiro sneaks in behind them, as if on cue, hair freshly
slicked back and haori swapped out for a tuxedo, his cheeks all pink as he leans grinning against the
door. “You're so beautiful.”

“Glad you noticed,” Taeko adjusts the bothersome veil pinned in her hair one last time and stands,
the heavy pearly-white skirts flowing out around her. “I fill this out very well when I inhale.”

He snorts a laugh and meets her in the middle, hands on her temporarily corseted hips. Their noses
brush easily— the poor man has definitely been forced into wearing lifts, probably to disguise her
height in the photos –and he does his best to kiss her without spoiling her makeup. “There’s
something I wanted to add on to this morning, but it's rather private—”

“Is it deep dark secret time already? You might have waited until after dinner,” Taeko feigns a sigh.
“Well, I’ve already seen all your birthmarks, so it can’t be too embarrassing. Out with it.”

Sojiro’s expression nears a pout while she laughs at him. “Well! It’s just that there’s something-
something I wanted to promise you,” he takes her hands where they're resting against his chest,
clasping them tight. “As long as we’re married, you can make any request of me and I’ll always say
yes.”

“That’s quite the unchecked power to grant me, you realize? You're asking for trouble.”

Sojiro laughs and shakes his head. “No I'm not, I know you’d never ask me anything unreasonable.”
His eyes lower as they pull each other closer. “Though there will be a number of unreasonable
demands made of you, I’m sorry to say.”

“Ahh, you say that like it’s new?” She kisses his forehead where his widow’s peak has been swept
back. “Catch up, Sojiro. I’m not worried.”

A few knocks sound at the door before his youngest cousin sticks his head in. “Would the bride and
groom like to join the rest of us at their own reception?"

The party is long, crowded, and full of repetitive, formal phrases. Upon returning to Shimada Castle, they crawl into bed rather than take each other to it. The soft quiet of their new bedroom and each other's breath upon their skin the best possible start to their shared life, no further passion or promise required.

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They save their honeymoon for several months, adjusting to married life until the May wedding of Taeko’s childhood friend. The accident of her birth resulted in her spending many hapless years in the town that boasted the main production plant of her father’s business, though the wedding is held in a bustling city on the Pacific coast, which Taeko is greatly relieved by. The ceremony is concise and heartfelt, the reception shoulder to shoulder. Sojiro thinks his English is perfect until they encounter Taeko’s junior high friends and she suddenly swaps accents.

After gripping his hand and dabbing her eyes as her former classmate Yukiko dances with her new husband, the music turns faster and Sojiro gets a better sense of why Taeko stops here every time she makes the trip. She must miss being able to let loose like this in the stuffy confines of Hanamura.

“One dance, Sojiro- you must be able to slow-dance!” Taeko yanks him onto the checker-patterned floor, raising her eyebrows after a few steps. “Oh wow, you really can’t. That’s so sad.”

“I was born without rhythm, it’s a medical condition,” Sojiro informs her with a dry scowl, leaning in to her ear. “Please let me sit down, this is so embarrassing.”

“No such luck,” Taeko grins and tucks him against her taffeta-covered shoulder, swaying to the music instead of attempting anything more complicated. “There’s a saying here, you have to dance with the one that brought you.”

Several hours later, he kicks off his shoes, drops his jacket on the floor, and collapses face-first into their fluffed hotel pillows, all while being laughed at by the woman he's vowed to spend his life with. She undresses and washes her face, returning in the men’s pajamas she favours and curling up beside him on the bed. He's nearly unconscious when she leans in to kiss his temple, softly murmuring her good-night, love-you, and that she's due in December.

After a few lengthy seconds of processing and longer moments of scrabbling up, near-frantic kisses and clinging embraces, Taeko gently pries his face away from her neck and chuckles softly, dragging her thumb across his wet lashes. “Don't start, you'll get me going. You're supposed to cry after the baby's born.”

“I can't help it,” he barks a laugh, dragging the heel of his hand across each cheek, surprised by the weakness of his voice. “I-I thought this might never happen.”

“I went off the pill six months ago,” Taeko replies flatly, her lips pinched into the frown he's grown so fond of, even when it's directed at him. “Your expectations for fertility could stand some adjustment.”

“No, no, I mean-” He waves his hand between them, half to cover his lack of composure. “I never thought any of this would happen, to me. That's all.”

Taeko's eyes soften in surprise, then a slight sadness that is hard to acknowledge, and recognition, much harder to accept but which he will never turn away from now that he has it. He cups her strong jaw again, his other hand reverently stroking her flat belly as they share an almost-chaste kiss. “I
wonder if our child knows what a wonderful mother they have.”

Taeko scoffs, pushing their foreheads together and tracing her fingers along the roaring, cobalt blue dragon etched into his left arm. “It barely has fingers, it doesn't know anything yet.”

Once the announcement is made, Taeko seems surrounded by her aunts and female cousins nearly every hour of every day. Drowning in advice and horror stories, a thousand do's and don'ts accepted with a mix of furrowed brows and forced smiles. Their fathers are excited and melancholy in turns. Sojiro’s mother is blissfully practical for her proximity, helping them assemble all they need and quietly pouring tea when she spots either of them fretting.

Sojiro's worry comes to an explosive climax when he steps into the car after the prefecture governor's New Year's dinner and one of their staff informs him that Taeko went into labour eight hours ago. His previous insistence that only his father could fire anyone in their employ is immediately forgotten. His ears ring deafeningly on the way to the hospital, one thought repeating among a thousand others: You didn't really think you'd get to keep this, did you?

He smokes through an entire pack of cigarettes by the time he's allowed out of the waiting room, the darkness outside creeping into pale yellow as he prays that Taeko isn’t as unlucky as her poor mother. That they'll be able to save her at least, if she is.

“Mind his head- there you are,” Taeko shifts the weight of the heavily bundled infant into his arms, laying back with a smile. “Look at you, you're a natural.”

Sojiro sits on the edge of the bed, his whole body curled around the red-cheeked baby in his arms. How empty he must have been before this love, this enormous, protective, ecstatic depth that could swallow the ocean itself. There's far-reaching and immediate fear, a hundred flavours of relief, but also curiosity beyond his previous capabilities. His small son lets out an even smaller gurgle as he stares up at him and Sojiro's heart breaks anew, as it surely will over and over for the rest of his life.

“What are we going to call him?” Taeko's voice is tired but strong, her hand tightly atop Sojiro's. “Any dead relatives you'd like to get on the good side of?”

Sojiro shakes his head without looking up, his chuckle raspy. “You did all the work, you get full naming rights.”

“That's fair,” Taeko smirks, flush with pride as she tickles the little one's chin. “What about Hanzo?”

Sojiro has to hush his laugh to avoid a scolding from the nurse. “Why would you do that to our firstborn child?”

“It suits him! Look at those eyes,” Taeko nudges back the little knit cap, drawing attention to the serious, deep-set eyes on the swollen, old-man face, still covered by grey-blue film. They're quiet for a moment, taking in all that he is as he blithely peers back and gums on Taeko's fingertip. “He'll need to be strong, he deserves a strong name.”

“You're right,” Sojiro murmurs, his throat and arms tightening. He bends to kiss his son's forehead, so warm and soft and here. “Hanzo it is, then.”

Both sides of the family receive their newest member with a joy that seems to temporarily blot out all past disagreements and resentment. The advice still comes in truckloads, but it's easier to forget once they're alone in their quarters upstairs. Sojiro's time away from the office is limited to a few days and the needs of their many branches never abate, but he wins points with the employees by insisting they all go home at suppertime. When they can't manage that, he at least gets home in time to bathe.
and put Hanzo to bed, even if he has to go back and stay past midnight. The path before his son is
difficult, but for now there are no lessons to be imparted, only sweet innocence to be enjoyed. He
doesn't dare miss a day.

As Hanzo grows, finding his feet and becoming more interested in playing than napping, neither he
nor Taeko are keen on leaving him an only child for long. Despite Hanzo's unintentional
interruptions due to bad dreams and desires for sustenance, they manage to make another one. Only a
little less nervous than the first time, Taeko's anxiety turns to consternation when the pregnancy
extends three weeks past the promised due date.

Sojiro returns home one night to find her on the stationary bike they keep in the rec room-turned-
playroom, a bowl of curry balanced on the handles and a heavy blanket tied around her middle. Her
messy bun bobs as she pedals lethargically. “Did you straighten things out with Nomura?”

“Yes, he wasn't skimming after all, he's just terrible with money. We swapped him out for Inoue. I'd
rather lose friendship than profits in an election year.” He greets her with a smooch and recoils at the
taste. “How can you stand that much spice?”

“This is my second bowl, I think the first one scalded off my tastebuds.” Taeko solemnly chews
another large bite before setting the bowl aside and leaning heavily forward. “If this thing doesn't get
out of me soon, I'm filing for divorce. You never told me that Shimadas made fat babies.” She
wincers and takes his hand, placing high it on her belly. “Not sure how it has any room left in there,
but it's been tap-dancing all day.”

The universe itself seems to still as he fits his palm around the nudge of an impossibly tiny foot. Still
in disbelief that his beloved Taeko's body can form and accommodate a separate, though small life in
all its miraculous complexity, while he's merely an observer, receiving enormous dividends on the
smallest of deposits.

“It never gets old for you, does it?”

“Never,” Sojiro concurs, tenderly kissing her sweaty forehead and relishing her secret sigh. Her
stomach’s dropped at least, easing her breathing and providing some hope that they'll be meeting
whoever-it-is soon. Four fiercely-strong limbs abruptly wrap themselves around his calf. “There you
are! The new baby's kicking, do you want to feel?”

Hanzo firmly shakes his head, appearing mildly horrified at the suggestion. Taeko giggles as Sojiro
lifts his son for a hug. “I think he thinks that I ate his sibling and he's next.”

“You have been a bit ravenous this time around,” Sojiro chuckles, ruffling his son's hair as he clings
to his chest. “My, your hair's gotten long. Do you want to go to the barber with me tomorrow?”

“Kaa-san says when it's short it looks like a duck's butt,” Hanzo replies definitively, smiling at him
with pensive brown eyes.

“I'm not wrong,” Taeko answers Sojiro's incredulous expression. “Poor child got my hair.”

Sojiro snorts and kisses the top of Hanzo's head. “Ah well, he does look awfully cute.”

“Not cute,” Hanzo interjects, bottom lip popping out. “M'handsome.”

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Another round of struggle and agony ending in triumphant, loving tears at a long-awaited cry,
another five days lolling about in the hospital, and another twenty minutes of Sojiro battling with the
car seat, an improvement on the hour he spent following Hanzo's birth. Their second son is born sweet and round-faced, frequently crying but easily soothed, a glimpse of his father's masculine beauty in his features. Taeko quickly settles on Genji, Sojiro shakes his head but accepts.

They're swarmed when they return home, poor Hanzo getting lost in the shuffle until Taeko feigns fatigue to buy them some time alone. The little boy pushes his face up close to the baby's as soon as Taeko sits carefully on the settee, full of questions. Why does his face look like that? When can he play outside? Why is he so sleepy when he hasn't even done anything?

As often as Taeko teases Sojiro for his sentimentality, the sight of Hanzo dutifully holding Genji the way she showed him as the younger one chews contentedly on his fist makes tears spring to her eyes. The rest of the world drops away as the four of them press close, her and Sojiro speaking in low tones as the boys study each other. All of it like a dream she would happily never wake from.

She belatedly notices Hanzo's head bobbing as he fights sleep, catching him and startling him awake before he can fall backwards. “Do you like your baby brother?”

“Mm-hmm.” Hanzo nods before yawning wide, smacking his lips and looking like a little old man with his half-shut eyes and slumped shoulders, hands still tight on Genji's swaddling wraps. “It's bedtime now.”

“That's right, let's get you—” Sojiro pauses when Hanzo scoots off the edge of the settee, tiny feet quickly tapping down the hall before they can react. He shares a quick, confused look with Taeko before following him, her a few steps behind.

Hanzo manages to kick the covers of his futon back, carefully setting a cooing Genji down on the pillow before laying down beside him, apparently not bothering with pajamas as he tucks them both in. He tries to keep his eyes open, waiting for his usual story, but to little avail. Sojiro scoops up his younger, fussing son and speaks softly as Hanzo balls a hand in his father's blue button-down and grumpily asks what his brother's size has to do with anything. Taeko stands in the doorway and presses a hand to her chest, finding herself mildly choked up. Postpartum hormones are such a wild ride.

The outside world beckons their attention away. Taeko diligently reads the newspaper while her father bounces Genji on his knee and squints at the crayon drawings Hanzo offers to him, trying and frequently failing to guess which animals he's scribbled. The elder Shimada is being quietly rescued from moments of confusion at business meetings more often, and only makes the briefest of appearances at Hanamura's various festivals and to-do's. The doctors can only offer solemn apologies and palliative options. Sojiro, when asked, merely comments that one needs and deserves more rest as one ages, and gets right back to work.

Economic predictions turn more dour as the year goes on, and less money to go around can open up their tight monopolies to intrusions and in-fighting. Outside funds are needed to keep Hanamura fat and happy during whatever comes next.

“So you're the only one going?”

Sojiro nods, sighing and drawing the duvet up to his waist. His suitcase stands packed and ready to go in front of their walk-in closet. “At least if they laugh in my face I'll be spared some embarrassment.”

“I doubt they will,” Taeko grimaces at the zap of her milk letting down, Genji's flailing limbs slowing to a stop as he happily takes in his bedtime snack. “Unless someone else has the same idea, you're giving them exclusive access to a whole new market. They'd be fools to turn you down.”
“We can hope,” Sojiro stretches his arms across their pillows, one hand running through the long hair hanging loose over her neck and raising goosebumps there. “But still, they’re holding all the cards. I'm no one to them.”

“Work with that, play dumb if you have to, but don't let them make a fool of you.” Taeko recognizes the hesitance in his voice, the tense of his jaw, and reaches for his chin, turning him to face her. “Teach them who you are.”

“I will.” Sojiro nods, his full lips tightening against his teeth, as though he's squaring up for a fight. Momentary doubt gives way to the power hidden in his lean frame. He shifts closer after a moment, toying with Genji's bare foot and counting his pea-sized toes. “I won't let you down.”

A month drags by before he returns, not even phone calls can be risked. Hanamura has rules of engagement, but in other circles whispering an I-love-you is revealing a weak point. She nearly runs like a child to the door when he arrives home. He had gotten more than he originally asked, spotting a disagreement between two of the negotiators and expertly playing both sides without either of them realizing. An expert observer and consummate actor, she never doubted him. The full beard is a surprise, though.

“I kept getting mistaken for younger, I had to ensure they took me seriously. Besides,” Sojiro scowls and points to a grey patch spreading at his temple, a near-identical one on the other side. “It goes well with these, I can't hide them any more.”

“Oh, quit whining. Grey hair only makes men more good-looking,” Taeko wraps her arms around his shoulders and angles down for a lingering kiss, smirking as she pulls away. “Hm, I think I like it.”

Sojiro returns her leer with interest, but she takes his hand and tugs him along. “Come with me. Before you talk to your father, I have something important to show you.”

He seems surprised when she leads him to the playroom, but lights up at Genji smashing plastic cars together in his playpen, beyond adorable in his bright yellow onesie. “Watch, now he'll make a liar out of me- Genji, look who's here!”

Genji looks up and beams, showing off his few baby teeth. He immediately crawls over to the bars and hauls himself up on his sock feet, waving one chubby arm as high as it can reach. “Bababababa!”

“Oh!” Sojiro nearly gasps, rushing over to pick Genji up and hoist the giggling baby over his head. “You're standing! And you've gotten so big, look at you!”

“Don't do that, he just ate,” Taeko cautions, smiling as he lowers his son to the ground, Genji's hands wrapped tight around Sojiro's thick fingers while he stands cautiously again, oblivious to the fuss he's causing.

Sojiro kneels and cuddles the small boy close, mouth turning down and his eyes far away. “I must admit, I'm envious of you at times.”

“Psh, don't be,” Taeko snorts and kneels beside him, clasping his shoulder as Genji babbles at them. “It's their future you're securing, that's what's important.”

“I know,” Sojiro sighs, smiling warmly as he lifts the little boy up on his fingers again. “I just wish I could be in two places at once.”

“Don't we all,” Taeko chuckles dryly. “At least you didn't miss his first steps.”
Genji wobbles and lets go of Sojiro's hands, taking a few bumbling steps forward before falling into his father's lap. He grabs at the boarding pass sticking out of his jacket pocket, happily distracted while his parents gape at him. “See? You didn't miss them.”

A great deal of crowing and cooing goes on as they space themselves apart, trying in vain to get Genji to walk again while he's more interested in crawling back to his toys. Hanzo shuffles in curiously, dragging a plastic action figure behind him. “Why is there so much yelling- Tou-san!”

“Hanzo!” Taeko scoops Genji out of the way just in time for the boy to sprint into Sojiro's arms, hugging him tightly. “Oh, I missed you. You aren't going off to college yet, are you?”

“No, I'm four,” Hanzo scrunches up his nose at his father, then tilts his head to one side. He reaches up and curiously pats Sojiro’s cheek before grinning wide. “You feel like Oba-san's new puppy!”

Taeko cackles at Sojiro's crestfallen expression, prying Genji's fingers out of her braid. “You're so good at giving compliments, Hanzo!”

The glory of Sojiro's successful trade deal is converted to energy. He shoulders even more of the workload, none of the family bothering to keep up the facade as his father's hospital visits become frequent. One health problem compounding another, one medication negating another one, it's all so unfair, yet Sojiro pretends not to bat an eye at his long absences from the dinner table. The words “My father sends his regrets,” are quickly spoken and forgotten. He does not flinch, he does not freeze, he only marches forward. Taeko walks her sons down the hill to visit their Ojii-chan, and she hugs him a little longer. A little frail, a little slower, but very much alive.

The phone call finally comes and she watches her husband break in half. The next morning he's making necessary arrangements and running the office by phone without so much as a sniffle. The funeral is grand in its weepy solemnity. The boys stay home with the nanny and whisper fantastical explanations to each other about where Ojii-san went.

Sojiro lets one last sign of distress slip a month later, when they return from Hanzo's uniform fitting to find a few of their longest-serving staff loading his mother's belongings into a rented van bound for one of the family vacation homes up in Yamagata. Taeko politely hurries her sons into another room and distracts them with cartoons so she can stand barefoot in the hall and eavesdrop.

“-I know this doesn't look good. I'm sorry for the gossip you'll have to deal with.” A pause. “Maybe tell them I'm ill, they can make their own assumptions from there.”

“I don't- You don't need to leave, you can stay here. I'll look after everything. We-”

“No, I won't. I can't sleep in this mausoleum any longer. It's already been too long, Sojiro.”

Sojiro's voice gains an unglued edge. “Okaa-san, I wish you-!”

“Don't make it harder on me, please. Let me have something, for once.”

Silence. That was that, then. Sojiro holds the door for his mother's town car and the four of them wave goodbye, each befuddled in their own way. The remaining staff murmur to each other in the shadows before scattering at a look from Taeko.

She finds him in the courtyard the next day, sitting and smoking on one of the stone benches she'd installed last summer. Numbly watching the boys as they tear around the yard in their spring jackets, racing over the little bridge and screaming at the flock of songbirds that's desperately trying to land and peck at the dirt for bugs.
He lights her cigarette and resumes staring while she inhales at length, extending her arm so the ashes drop on the rocky path. “I wonder what this game's called?”

“‘Terrorizing the local wildlife,’ I think,” Sojiro chuckles weakly as Hanzo and Genji launch themselves at the birds once more, racing back to the bridge and shouting some sort of dialogue at each other. The theatrics of it are rather inspired, almost scripted. “It's all up to me now, isn't it.”

“Don't be ridiculous,” Taeko answers quickly, though it isn't a question. “Of course not. I'm right here.” She pulls at him and he comes reluctantly, laying his head stiffly on her shoulder. “We're in this together, don't you ever think otherwise.”

Sojiro permits himself a shaky exhale, the boys rushing past them and yelling over each other. “I don't deserve you.”

Taeko sighs, regretting her indulgence of that particular phrase in teasing, tender moments. “As if I would be here if that were true, fool.”

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Sojiro remembers hating that uniform, with its heavy black jacket and pinchy shoes and the cap that never seemed to fit right. Seeing it on his eldest son, along with the enormous leather backpack hanging off his slim shoulders, makes him grateful to have lived long enough to see this. Hanamura's abundant cherry blossoms have even obliged him by bursting into their frenetic pink bloom just in time.

“Don't be nervous,” Sojiro encourages after Hanzo struggles to smile for the photos. “You're very smart. You're going to like school, I promise. I bet you won't even want to come home when we pick you up.”

Hanzo nods and swallows audibly, taking his mother's hand and waving at his brother. “Bye Genji! Don't touch my toys!”

Genji promptly throws himself on the ground and full-on wails. The nanny scoops him up and rushes him inside, his cries increasing in pitch and fervour. Sojiro shares a worried glance with Taeko, looking lovely in her sleek black skirt and jacket. She nods at him, leading Hanzo towards the car. “Check on him, we still have time.”

Sojiro steps inside where the poor young woman hasn't even made it past the entrance, Genji flailing and howling like he's suddenly developed an acute ear infection, tears and snot pouring down his red face. “What's the matter-”

“No!” The little boy violently smacks his father's hands away, nearly falling out of her arms. “Go 'way! You're taking anija, I hate you! I hate you!”

“Genji, settle down,” Sojiro keeps his voice calm and quiet, managing to get words in when the boy inhales. “Hanzo will be back before supper, there's no reason to be so upset.”

“No! You're lying!” He wheezes, shaking from the force of his tantrum. “Hanzo's gonna be at school till he's a grown-up! Noriko said so!”

Noriko gasps, her pale face flushing deep pink. “Oh, goodness, I didn't mean- I'm so sorry-”

“Nothing to apologize for,” Sojiro waves it off, biting back a laugh and taking a tissue from his pocket to wipe down his son's face as he heaves, running low on vocal steam. “Hanzo's going to come home every day, Genji. You'll get to go to school too, in a few years.”
“Anija's coming back?” Genji asks, voice ragged and eyes still leaking. “I thought he was going 'way forever!”

“We would never do that,” Sojiro soothes, kissing his son's forehead as Noriko bounces him gently, his face still stuck in a heart-breaking pout. The nickname slips out, unused since he was very young. “Poor little sparrow, I'm sorry we scared you.”

Hanzo takes to his studies as he has every other task presented to him, working in earnest silence and only asking for help as a last resort. Sojiro wonders if he already knows, realizes the weight as he had at that age. He can't protect him, knowing it would only do him harm, and instead tries to respect the first signs of maturity and responsibility in the young boy. Praising his gold star stickers and the positive reports from his martial arts and archery instructors, listening to what he learned each day even when he can barely keep his eyes open.

Sometimes Hanzo is quiet for too long, absorbed in his books, his coloured pencils, and the rock collection he maintains rigorously and keeps on a shelf too high for his brother to reach. Sojiro will coax him away from time to time, to play a game or watch something on television, but sometimes he resists and he leaves him be, a bit curious as to what could keep a first-grader so lost in thought. Genji is always successful in obtaining Hanzo's undivided attention, only sometimes resorting to mischief.

Genji is often scolded at family gatherings for being demanding, loud, defiant. Sojiro tries to guide him away from causing trouble, but feels no call to discipline him in advance of bad behaviour. Genji is everything he should be. Fully and vibrantly alive in his tiny body. The first to introduce himself, to charge towards something interesting, to laugh his deliriously endearing belly-laugh. Sweet and expressive, deeply attached to anything he loves be it human, animal, or two-dimensional. Sojiro catches fireflies for him just to watch the wonder unfold on his face anew. He's unchained and guileless, much like his own brother was so very long ago, unburdened in a way neither he nor Hanzo can afford to be. Sojiro would see him remain so for the rest of his life. His two sons, still as unfathomable to him as they were before they were born.

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“A girl would be nice,” Sojiro whispers, his arms tight as he slots up behind her, their bare skin warm beneath the light blankets. “Don't you think so?”

“It's not my genes that get a say,” Taeko chuckles, sighing as his hands stroke along her belly. “I'll thank you to remember that.”

“I know,” Sojiro snickers softly, kissing her shoulder. “I'm just saying, it would be nice. You could name her Sei Shonagon.”

He yelps quietly when she reaches back and smacks his hip. “Don't mock me.”

“It's not mocking if it's true.” Sojiro laughs against her, deftly grabbing her wrist when she aims for him again, shaking with the effort of holding her back and she laughs too, light and secure in the span of his arms.

Quite the opposite of how she feels a few weeks later in the obstetrician's office. The absence of a heartbeat more deafening than anything she ever imagined.

There is no kindness in the doctors' words or hands. A storm rages inside her body for days afterwards. She stays in bed and can't bring herself to get up. She knows what will be waiting for her. Those vultures have been waiting for her to come up short for years, and here's something ripe
and ready for their claws. A proper failure, a narrative waiting to be written of how bad of a mother she is and all the things she's done wrong because her father didn't bother to raise her right, let her stay overseas too long, spoiled her in his grief. An outlet for their resentment because their husbands have found younger, prettier women and won't touch them anymore.

That's all that matters to them. She could take every step perfectly, manage every business matter with flawless poise and she'd still be the failed woman they told her she was from the start. She smothers the scream inside her that they're right. That she's done something awful and deserves this. Her birth ended her mother's life, and now she gets to be on the other side of it. Incompetent, empty, and without a scrap of agency.

She hears the quiet clink of a glass on their nightstand before the bed sinks down behind her. Sojiro's hand is too gentle on her arm, his voice too soft, cutting her like paper. “Is there anything I can do?”

Taeko sucks in a breath, quite certain he's asked several times already but she hasn't been able to listen. “No, there's nothing.”

She feels him shifting around, a tone of subdued desperation when he speaks. “There must be something, I hate seeing you like this. Please, Taeko- I can't just leave you in here.”

Her eyes focus on her right arm, tangled in the stale sheets before her, it's just light enough to see the pale green shine of her tattoo. Two long, thin dragons wrapped around each other, done about a year after Hanzo was born, by a branch of Sojiro's family that had passed down the art for thirty generations, so they claimed. An heir and a spare, that was what she represented. That was the only accomplishment she would ever be recognized for. “Get a vasectomy.”

A faltering noise of surprise. “I don't know if we should be making rash decisions right now-”

“It is not rash,” Taeko snarls and rolls over, pushing herself up to look him in the eye. “I'd get it done myself if I weren't sick to death of people rooting around in my insides. I won't do this again, and I'm not taking any chances. I can't.”

“I'm not unwilling,” Sojiro holds up his hands defensively. “I just think we should take some time-”

“Get it done or sleep in your office,” Taeko bites back, spine straight and throat scalding hot. “Or does your word mean nothing to you?”

Sojiro’s steely eyes go wide for a moment. She turns away and flops back down on the bed, eyes burning with tears and unwilling to listen anymore. Every muscle in her body is tense and her stomach is churning. She has failed, after all. He saw her like that, and now this- had a family been too much to ask for? Has she already kept it too long?

She opens her eyes and finds her eldest son staring back at her, frozen in fear. Barely tall enough to see over their high bed and tightly clutching the strange onion-octopus plush that he and Genji trade between them as a comfort object. He must have snuck in, who knows when, he's so quiet. “Oh- oh, Hanzo, I'm so sorry. Come here, it's okay-”

Rushing forward to lift him up makes her sense of equilibrium lurch painfully, and she groans as she clutches him to her chest and her head spins. Sojiro reaches to steady her. “Easy, they said you'd be anemic, I'll get you something-”

“Genji,” Taeko interrupts, her head woolly now that the anger's been replaced. When was the last time she had held either of her boys? She can't even remember when she last saw them. “Where's Genji?”
“He's taking a nap-”

“Get him, please, I want to see him.”

Sojiro looks duly perplexed but jumps to the order, jogging out of the room. She strokes Hanzo's silky black hair as he stares up at her, eyes as big as his voice is small. “Are you going to die, Kaa-san?”

“No! Of course not!” She braces him tightly against her, resting her cheek on his head. “I'm just a little sick, I'll be fine- Everything's going to be fine. I promise.”

Sojiro appears with Genji, the little boy rubbing his eyes and looking thoroughly annoyed. He lowers him onto her lap so she can hug them both, rocking gently as she tries not to cry and confuse them further. Sojiro's strong arms come around all three of them so carefully, testing how welcome he is. She buries her face in his neck and hides her sobs there. He says nothing, holding them all tighter.

Routine returns them to something normal. Hanzo starts a new school year and Genji charms the maids into sneaking cookies for him. Her father takes a fall but recovers admirably, if somewhat grudgingly. The weather turns warm and Sojiro makes arrangements for them to go on a three-week holiday.

“We can visit Yukiko, if you'd like,” Sojiro cautiously slides some brochures her way while they're smoking and finishing their drinks on the terrace after dinner. “I thought the boys might like it more than another trip to the country. Besides, if they're going to have citizenship there, they ought to see what it's like.”

She agrees and they jet off as soon as Hanzo's on summer break and the last threads of business are tied up. Yukiko's actually back in their old hometown visiting her parents for the first week, but Taeko doesn't mind. She needs the lead time.

The rainy weather perturbs the boys, leaving them restless until the sun finally breaks. She chases them down to the sandy beach, her muscles toned again from returning to her kickboxing routine in their workout room. They picked the perfect spot quite by accident, the nearest house a mile away and the ocean gently lapping the curved shore, spilling into a little cove where Hanzo takes Genji's hands and patiently teaches him everything he's learned in swim class until they're both paddling around and splashing each other.

Sojiro watches them for a long time, affection in his gaze as sits on the towel, arms folded on his knees over his dry black trunks. The boys start digging a deep hole near the water to catch a sea monster, supposedly, and she catches Sojiro's eyes trailing over her when she returns for a few thirsty gulps of water from the cooler. The red one-piece lifts her sloping breasts and displays most of her stretchmarks and stomach pudge and still he looks, cheeky enough to glance away when she looks back.

Taeko grins and retrieves the SPF 100 sunscreen she'd slathered Hanzo in earlier, Genji tanning to a toasty brown much like her own skin. “Come on, you're swimming.”

“No, it's alright,” Sojiro jumps at the cold touch. “I'm fine, you three have fun.”

“The hell we will,” Taeko snorts, coating him in the stuff and dragging him to the ocean's edge before teasingly shoving him in. He shows the boys how to hold their breath underwater, tossing them in the air when they come back up and making them squeal. She and Sojiro hoist them onto their shoulders and let them play-fight, catching them before they can really fall. The four of them build the foundations of a truly ambitious sandcastle by the time Taeko notices Hanzo's shoulders
turning pink and urges them under the beach showers and back inside. Guards are unnecessary and staff were happily left behind. Taeko fries up some dinner while the boys rinse their new collection of very important shells, rocks, and sticks in the bathtub, falling asleep in front of the television with full bellies and t-shirts stripped off in the midsummer heat. Sojiro carefully carries them to bed and gets them comfortable while Taeko washes the sand out of her hair. It's grown to her waist again, and takes a great deal of lathering and combing to stay manageable. She settles on a haphazard braid and wraps a loosely-knitted throw blanket around her shoulders, wandering out onto the large deck to find Sojiro sitting and smoking on a lounge chair. Perched on the edge and staring up at the night sky, brimming with stars until it's cut off by the crest of the dense, mountainous pine forest behind them.

She stares for a while before deciding to settle in behind him, pressing along his strong back and wrapping her arms around his ribs. He rubs a hand over hers and she sighs, lifting some hairs at the back of his neck. He's going grey all over now, little stripes of silver popping up even in his beard, making him look all distinguished, though his dark eyes are still much too boyish. “I’m so sorry.”

“Hm?” He looks over his shoulder, jolted from his thoughts and genuinely surprised. “For what?”

“For everything,” Taeko lays her cheek against the back of his shoulder. “I know you wanted another one.” Her eyes start to burn again. “I wanted another one.”

“Don't be,” Sojiro replies, intertwining their fingers, his deep voice all soft and warm as it only is when they're alone. “You and the boys are all I need. I don't know if I could have tried for another, I couldn't bear watching you go through that again.”

Taeko hums and shuts her eyes, the salt scent of the ocean filling her chest. “I wish you hadn't agreed so easily. I wish you had shouted and stood your ground and told me I was being selfish.”

Sojiro's tone is bewildered. “Why would you want that?”

“Because I'd know what to do with that.”

She leans heavily on him for a few moments before he flicks his butt out over the rocks and slowly turns, pulling her legs over his lap and sealing their lips together. He brushes kisses across her high forehead when they pull apart. “I meant what I said, there's nothing you could ask me that I wouldn't be willing to do. It was the logical decision, you simply caught me off-guard.”

Taeko snorts at him, kissing his scratchy cheek and winding her arms around his neck, the blanket sliding off her shoulders. “Well, I must admit that there's something very chivalrous about a man being willing to take a hot iron to his balls for me.”

They giggle heartily, Sojiro's lips quirking on a grimace. “To be honest, the freezing needle was the worst part.”

Taeko throws her head back to laugh, kissing him again. He pauses afterwards, expression turned contemplative. He slips one arm under her knees and the other around her back, standing abruptly. “Sojiro-!”

Barely two steps and his sandal slips out from under him, losing their balance and sending them crashing down with a painful thump and several curses, followed by silence as they wait to hear Hanzo and Genji, who blissfully continue sleeping. Taeko massages her now-bruised tailbone and raises her eyebrows at him. “And what were you trying to do?”

“Be romantic?” Sojiro forces a smile, wiping his dirty, scraped palms on his polo shirt.
“Mhmm, how's that working out for you?”

“You tell me.” A smile steals out of her, matching his as they press close again, as eager and needy as teenagers on stolen time.

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“...Only then did they understand the significance of a pinch of dust. The Dragon Brothers thanked the Emperor, drained their cups, and left through the checkpoint.”

The boys stare up at their father from where they sit shoulder-deep in the bathwater, wholly engrossed in the story until the ending sinks in. Genji jumps up first, nearly slipping. “What happened next? Tell us, tell us!”

“Tomorrow, little sparrow,” Sojiro musses his son's hair, soaked to a black sheen, nodding at Taeko as she enters. “It's time for young boys to go to bed.”

“You always stop at the good parts!” Genji whines, climbing out of the bath despite his mother's reprimand that he'll crack his head open if he's not careful.

“Can I stay up until nine?” Hanzo asks around a yawn. “I'm not sleepy yet.”

Sojiro shakes his head, fumbling for the plug. “I'm afraid not.”

Hanzo hums and chews on his bottom lip. “Can I stay up until eight forty-five?”

“Hah, listen to the little negotiator- Genji!” Taeko shouts as the boy escapes the clutches of her towel and races out the door, his mother hot on his heels. “Get back here!”

Sojiro laughs while Hanzo snickers devilishly, not joining Genji's exploits as often now, but always endorsing them. He offers his son a hand out of the bath and hands him a towel, Hanzo much too grown-up to accept help aside from letting his mother brush out his hair (“You pull too hard, Tou-san, you'll make me bald.”). “Where are we going for dinner tomorrow? I promise not to tell Genji. I'm very good at keeping secrets.”

“It's a surprise,” Sojiro smiles fondly at the intensity of his son's expression, wrapping himself in a towel. Genji had passed his entrance interview with flying colours, almost soldier-like in how seriously he had taken it, and they wanted to celebrate before he officially started school. Hanzo sighs and heads for the sink, no longer needing the plastic stool to reach his toothbrush.

Genji's impish shrieks echo on the stairs and Sojiro's lips twitch with pity. “Hanzo, I need you to do something very important for me.”

Hanzo jerks his head up, spilling bright green toothpaste on the counter. “What is it?”

Sojiro kneels down, a few joints popping,- he already looks old, does he have to feel old, too? - “I need you to look out for your brother and help him when you're at school, make sure he's safe and doing well.”

“I will,” Hanzo answers readily, pulling his towel tighter. He seems to have inherited his mother's slim hips, though his shoulders are already widening, strong from daily exercise. “Ohara-sensei says we have to help all the new students.”

“That's right, but it's different with Genji.” Sojiro tries to hide the strain in his smile. “Your brother will always be your responsibility, even when you're grown up. You have to look after him,
especially when your mother and I aren't there. Do you understand?"

Hanzo nods slowly, wheels turning behind his topaz eyes. “Yes, Tou-san.”

“Ha! Got you, you little monkey!” Some thumps and peals of laughter resound in the hallway before Taeko reenters, thrusting Genji into his father's arms. “What is it with boys and running around naked? I never did that.”

“What can I tell you? Men are animals,” Sojiro chuckles, tapping Genji's nose with one finger as the boy grins unrepentantly. “Don't give your mother a hard time.”

Genji does well at school, though he struggles to keep his eyes on his own work, over-excited at the prospect of friends outside of his numerous cousins. They're allowed to walk to school so long as they hold hands to and from the gates, and they happily follow the path down the hill and through town every weekday, always trailed by a plainclothes guard. There's still animosity created by the scarcity of the recession, even Hanamura's safety can't be counted on.

Taeko and Sojiro discuss business in the dining room or their studies after the boys finish their homework and retire to video games and comics, the pattern interrupted by the passing of Taeko's father. Though she weeps several nights in his arms, after the funeral she draws herself up and returns to examining the unofficial and official financial reports for errors and losses, eyes as sharp as a hawk's and her mind twice so.

Sojiro worries that she's pushing herself, but she shakes her head in the low yellow light, smoke curling into the rapid fan overhead. “He was a tired old man, like he said, there's no tragedy to it. He'll haunt me if I spend any more time moping.” She flips to the next page. Shake it off and keep it moving, her unspoken motto. How he admires her.

Hanzo is brought into the family business in junior high, understanding what is explained to him with relative ease, having been an astute eavesdropper at family gatherings for many years. He accompanies them to his first important function, the wedding of the mayor's daughter, when he's nearly thirteen. Genji is dropped off at a friend's house for a sleepover so he won't kick up a fuss at home. He fidgets endlessly in the car, all too aware of what this debut means, and Sojiro feels caught between pride and sympathy.

“Don't be nervous,” Taeko smooths her son's hair back, long red nails shining in the bright lights of downtown. “Keep your chin up and remember, it's you that they'll be trying to impress someday. Everything these people have, they owe to us. Don't let them forget it.”

Sojiro tries to relish his son's presence at the office on weekends and during vacations, his weeknights dedicated to school and extracurriculars. His father's brothers admonish Hanzo's missteps as they had his, sometimes with only a withering look at an inopportune question. It's necessary, and Hanzo learns quickly. Sojiro is painfully aware that mistakes are opportunities to be exploited by those who would see you humiliated, abbreviated, or eliminated. It has to be done, he reminds himself.

He can only hope that Hanzo will take the time to find meaningful love, one he can come home to and build a family and a future on. The boy still seems uninterested in romance, but he's got time yet.

His younger son lives up to his namesake, shining with energy at all times and only losing his smile when he brings home his slipping report cards. Sojiro isn't too worried. Many other young men go through the same phase and get serious as they get older. He wasn't permitted such a luxury, but he holds no envy the way the others do. Genji has no strings on him and he knows it, he can't blame him for enjoying that.
Not to say that Genji doesn't need to be scolded for yawning and glaring during important dinners or grounded for breaking curfew. Hanzo receives the same punishments, admittedly less frequently. Even still, the rest of the family only sees a young man shirking what should be a one-step-back, silent, obedient role as second son, and he has no power to change that. He never will.

“Finally, a decent radio station!” Taeko exclaims, one hand on the dial and one on the wheel as they drive one of their smaller vehicles up to the summer house, their staff and luggage following behind. The air conditioner hisses on high and the grey highway gleams almost white outside the tinted windows. “Who's my back-up vocals?”

Genji enthusiastically volunteers from the backseat, belting along with his mother and equally off-key. To his credit, he at least gets all the lyrics right.

Hanzo shuts the book on his lap and leans in to where his father has tipped his seat back. “Can I please borrow the headphones? Takeshi never gave mine back.”

Sojiro nods, pulling them out of the centre console while Hanzo retrieves his mp3 player from his backpack, whispering as he takes them. “Don't make any sudden moves, or they'll force you to join in.”

Hanzo rolls his eyes while his father softly laughs and pulls his sunglasses back down. He would learn, as his mother and brother already had, that moments of freedom are meant to be enjoyed.

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Manhood bleeds into her boys faster than she can keep up with. She catches it in Hanzo first, happening to glance at his ankles when he gets home from school. “Why are you wearing Genji’s pants?”

“I'm not?” he replies with a frown, seeming offended at the very suggestion. Sweat soaks through his white shirt where the heavy straps of his bag dig in, summer dragging out endlessly.

“You look like you're ready for a typhoon,” Taeko smiles wryly, tugging at the cuff of his pants with her bare toes. “Didn't we just buy you new ones?”

“I dunno,” he shrugs and jerks away, his flush painfully obvious on his cheeks. He has Sojiro to blame for that.

“Hey, I promise it stops eventually,” Taeko clasps his shoulder, which he allows though he’s still scowling self-consciously. “At least no one can call you short anymore.”

That does boost his spirits enough for a slight smile, but it seems like only a week passes before he's in her study begging to switch from music to art because his voice has started cracking and he'd rather die than sing another bar in front of anyone ever again. Well, not in those exact words, but the implication is definitely there.

As in everything, Hanzo goes first and Genji follows immediately after. He seems to go to bed cute and chubby-cheeked and wake up sleek and handsome. So much like his father that her heart hurts. She's aging too and it's making her soft, damn it.

More concerning is the foot-high stack of boxed chocolates Genji saunters in with the day before his fourteenth birthday. “Stopped by the girls’ school on the way home, did we?”

“They met me at the gate,” he grins back, bold as brass, before whistling his way up the stairs, muffled music thumping dully through the floors a few minutes later.
Sojiro sighs softly and folds up his newspaper, warming his feet under the kotatsu after ice caused a power failure at the office and forced everyone home. “You know, I'm pretty sure we can still change his name.”

She shoots him a look, fighting with the uncooperative remote. “Oh, don't start with me.”

Hanzo returns later, still in his archery gear with a single, inexpensive bag of chocolate from his co-chair on the inter-school committee. She's grateful to have at least a little more time.

Business takes a rough turn after a shift in local government, Hanzo spends more time with his father to learn damage control, resilience, how and when to start over. Otherwise he's at the dojo, or the range, or up in his rooms with the well-mannered farm boy who's patiently dragging him through calculus and algebra. Getting Genji to come home on weekends becomes more and more akin to trying to call in the family cat. More than once she sends one of the guards out, but Genji knows there's more fun to be had outside Hanamura's walls and rarely stays in one place for long.

“You're sitting here until it's done and that's final,” Taeko says crisply, shoving Genji back into the dining room chair, his homework untouched in front of him as he laughs mockingly under his breath. “You think this is funny? You can't just blow everything off! You still need to make something of yourself!”

“Pft, no I don't,” Genji fires back, dripping with arrogance that's broken by the rap of a rolled up magazine on the back of his head. “Ow! That hurt, dammit!”

Hanzo snorts derisively on his way back from the kitchen, bags of snacks tucked under his arm. Genji shoots him a glare that could peel paint. Hanzo returns it without a flinch. Sojiro insists they'll grow out of it. Taeko is unconvinced.

Hanzo's winter birthday allows him to get his tattoo done as soon as he's eighteen, sitting remarkably still through the outline until his skin won't take the ink anymore. She and Sojiro couldn't be prouder, and the rest of the Shimadas are momentarily impressed by his fortitude.

“Don't scratch, you'll wreck it,” Taeko tugs his hand away after he blows out the candles. “Just slap it, gently, like a baby's butt.”

“Do you usually go around slapping babies?” Genji snickers, barely lifting his eyes from his brother's arm. “It looks so sick! What colour is it gonna be?”

“They haven't said yet,” Hanzo shivers slightly as he cuts his cake into generous slices, compelled into short sleeves despite the January cold. The tattoos were once ascribed supernatural protection from spirits more ancient than time, believed to be as real as the clouds and rain. Even now, it's more than lip service, the family banks their legacy and Hanamura's loyalty on legends.

Hanzo happily unwraps a shiny new laptop for university from Sojiro, a posh men's watch from Taeko, and a small coupon from Genji. “'One night out on me?'”

“You never do anything fun anymore,” Genji whinges, drumming his fingers on the wooden table. “Let's go to the arcade, I'll buy all your tokens and snacks as long as you win me something!”

Hanzo throws up a thick eyebrow. “I thought this was a gift for me?”

“It will be, if you can pull the stick out of your ass long enough to-”

“Genji, that's enough.” Taeko's stern tone earns her an eyeroll, but Genji's still eagerly leaning towards his brother.
“You should go,” Sojiro adds after a matching look. “You've been hanging out with old men all day, you ought to spend time with people your own age.”

Hanzo fights a smile and gnaws on the inside of his cheek. “I mean, I guess—”

Genji whoops and drags his brother off by his non-tattooed arm, loudly promising not to get into trouble. Taeko chuckles, knowing that's a lie and minding a little less this time.

***

Opportunities to excel could easily swing back around and lay you open. In the course of an ambitious summer project, Hanzo makes an expensive mistake that cannot be easily concealed or fixed. His great-uncles are not keen to suffer foolishness gladly. When whispers are filtering back about old grudges, non-existent debts deemed unpaid, there is no room for error.

Sojiro notices Hanzo's hands vibrating, echoing up to his shoulders as they step inside the elevator. He keeps his eyes forward. “By the time we get downstairs, you need to pull yourself together. You're only making it harder on yourself.”

Sojiro himself can barely escape them long enough to go home. Every time he quenches a fire, another one starts. A shipment gets stalled in customs. A phone call to an old friend isn't returned. Another tough-on-crime campaign cuts into their gambling profits while their legitimate operations take hits. Everywhere he goes, someone's snapping at him. He bends and stretches as far as he can, trying to keep everything balanced just so. He'd protect his son from it if he could. He'd take them all to an island made of marshmallows and gumdrops if he could, too.

“You can't be doing this anymore.” Sojiro rolls the window down an inch to let his smoke out as the driver points the car towards the hospitable darkness of home. “You're a man now, only children get upset when they're scolded. You need to act your age.”

“Why? Genji never does,” Hanzo mutters into his hand, facing the opposite window.

Sojiro takes a long pause, thoughtfully pulling on his cigarette before speaking in a warning tone. “Hanzo.”

He waits, and Hanzo finally gets the nerve to turn and face him, eyes cast down. “The work that we do lets all our families live the lives they deserve, and that includes your brother. Their happiness is our success.”

Hanzo presses his lips tightly together, turning them white. “That's not how they feel.”

Sojiro's jaw tightens. Leaving his son alone with those scavengers is an unavoidable mistake, but he needs to learn how to live with them. “When they're worth listening to, I'll consider how they feel, and not until.” He takes another drag on his cigarette. “And I don't want to hear that sort of resentment from you again. No one can help when they're born, including you.”

Tensions boil over before Hanzo takes the train back to university. Taeko forcibly separates them, all but bolting the corridors to their separate floors shut. Her shouts echo down the grand stairs, the heels of her shoes driving like nails into the wood until she slams the door to Sojiro's study and heads straight for his mini-fridge. “I swear, if you try to tell me one more time that this is all hormonal, I'll start putting saltpeter in their food. I'm not joking.”

Sojiro keeps himself silent while she pours a drink. “I'm sorry you've been having to deal with this alone-”
“Quit being sorry and start doing something,” Taeko snaps back, her glare piercing straight through him. “This is the last thing we need. What are we setting them up for if we let this go on?”

“I know, I know,” Sojiro sighs and massages the bridge of his nose, a tense headache building behind his eyes. “It’s frustrating, but they’re young, still. You have to understand, it’s a brother thing.”

“How would you know?” Sharp as acid, quick as a viper. Silence. Sojiro returns to methodically reading his ledgers line by line. “...I'm sorry. That was cruel—"

His voice comes out soothing, urgently smoothing it over. “Don't worry, it's fine.”

“No it isn't!” She's at his desk in a rush, slamming her palm down on it. “Damn it, Sojiro, I'm your wife! Yell at me, get angry, do something! What are you so afraid of?”

He stares back at her, dumbly agape. She dials back only slightly, dragging a hand through her long hair. “I don't understand- why do you sit there and accept everything that happens to you?”

Sojiro's throat constricts. “I don't.”

“You do!” Taeko pauses for a swig from the icy glass. “What do you think will happen if you disagree with me? Or anyone? You're not me, why do you mould yourself into what everyone else wants when you don't have to?”

Sojiro stares up into those sublimely brutal eyes, his tongue as thick and stupid as a child's. The honesty of his words opens him right to the bone, letting a sliver of the marrow out as he forms a genuine question. “...What else am I supposed to do?”

Her eyes crinkle up after a moment and she lets out a pitying sigh, turning away and leaning against his desk, arms wrapped around herself. He listens to the whiskey sluice in her tumbler for a while before finding his words. “...I would understand if you loved me less, knowing that.”

Taeko barks out a hoarse laugh and drops her glass on the desk with a clunk. She comes around and he rises to his feet at the pull of her hands. “I take it back.” She tucks loose, silver hair behind his ears, nails catching as she curves her hands under his jaw and tilts his head up, her expression caught between smug and despondent. “You may not push back, but you have the gall to insult me to my face, and I'll always appreciate that about you.”

Her lips are faintly sticky, still painted from an earlier PTA meeting, and as familiar as his own skin. Her hand slides to the back of his neck, his thumbs in the belt loops of her tight trousers, fingers digging into her hips after a moment's hesitation. Rye on his tongue and her teeth on his neck. Not passion spurring him on, though he has a mile-deep well of it for her, but an ache. Deeper and more visceral than he'll ever say, an echo of understanding in the ferocity of her embrace.

***

Yukiko takes ill that winter. The kind of ill that necessitates long-distance calling cards and a last-minute plane ticket with no return date. Three weeks of helping her friend out of bed and keeping her pre-teen children in food and entertainment while her frazzled husband runs to and from work is almost a respite. At home, every day is beginning to feel like a crisis. Funds are pinched and bridges are burning, everyone who brings them news does so with a frown. Still, being away improves nothing, least of all her worries. She calls her younger son on his birthday and takes her leave as soon as her old friend is on the mend.

She's unpacking and groggy from an eighteen-hour flight and infuriating morning traffic when Genji
comes bounding into their bedroom, not even bothering with a hello. “Kaa-san, look, look! We match!”

He's grinning wide as he rolls up the sleeve of his white jacket. Thin outlines of black on his right arm, only one dragon, coiled tight around the curves of his bicep and forearm. She cradles his wrist to examine it, clicking her tongue in distaste. “I wish they had waited. It's not like I was gone indefinitely.”

“Eh, it's boring to watch anyway,” Genji shrugs slightly. “I can't wait to get it coloured and be done with it. I hated the feeling of it, it feels like a hot knife dragging- gah, I don't even wanna think about it! It sucked.”

Taeko chuckles, her bleary eyes finally taking note of his hair. Recently re-bleached and coloured that toxic green again. His teachers are too skittish to say anything, but she's fairly sure his great-uncle Hiro had gotten the hair dye off every pharmacy shelf in a hundred miles. “And you got it done looking like that?”

Genji snorts, his lips curling back. “What were they gonna do? Pin me down and shave me bald?”

She shakes her head, a laugh bursting out of her. “You're even ballsier than I give you credit for.” She musses his hair, then pauses, fingers tangled in his crispy green locks. “Just might work out for you in the end, too.”

Something in her tone gives him pause, making him look at her a little sideways, barely an inch separating them now. “If you keep playing the fool, they'll keep underestimating you. Let them. You'll be a much bigger help to your brother if you let them write you off.”

His face quirks into a faint frown, naive and perhaps too impatient to fully understand. “Uh, okay, I guess. Anyway, I gotta go. See you later.”

Her smile turns toothy, he moves to walk away and she pulls him back, trapping his lean frame in her arms. He permits a brief squeeze and promptly tries to wiggle away. “What, you're too cool to hug your mother now? I missed you, you know.”

“Yeah, you too,” Genji struggles harder when she holds him fast. “Ugh, let go! You're so annoying!”

He actually makes it home for dinner for once, his friends dispersed and food calling. Sojiro joins them partway through, tie slightly askew and eyes red, the only tells of a day of unending problems. Hanzo eats before catching the train home from class and finds them in the main family room, the kotatsu angled so they can all face the television. Genji nearly knocks over his tea when Hanzo hurriedly shoves his legs under the blanket, accidentally kicking him in the process. “Gah, your feet are like icicles! Did you forget to wear shoes or what?”

“I stepped on what I thought was snow and ended up ankle-deep in a puddle,” Hanzo scoffs at Genji's taunting point-and-laugh, turning to his mother. “How are the Carp doing?”

Taeko groans, her eyes trained on the screen. “They're blowing it, again. I've seen kindergartners play a better game than this.”

“They've been blowing it for the past ten years,” Sojiro adds with a weak chuckle. “Why not root for the home team?”

Taeko blows the steam off her tea. “[Boys, where can the home team go?]”
“[Straight to hell!]” The two young men answer in near-unison, laughing intermittently afterwards. Sojiro shakes his head, glancing at her with a wry smirk. “I thought we were discouraging vulgarity at the table.”

“Eh, it's not like that'll offend anyone,” Taeko shrugs, leaning forward under the weight of her exhaustion before forcing herself to straighten up. “Besides, English is the only subject some of us are getting an A in, so I might as well encourage it.”

“Aw, Kaa-san, lay off!” Genji whines, scowling and propping his cheek up with his hand. “We came here to have a good time.”

“Came where, downstairs?” Hanzo asks incredulously.

“I'll lay off when your grades come up, and not before- another strike?” She yanks her hair tie out, harshly redoing her ponytail. “Give me something to believe in, you're killing me!”

“Ah, but you've always loved an underdog story, haven't you?” Sojiro's fingers, spot-warmed from his mug and cold around the edges, take her hand gently.

“Well yes, I married you, didn't I?” The boys guffaw at that, Hanzo trying and failing to hide his behind his fist. They droop as the game plays on, hushed in the roar of the televised crowd and the hum of the maids mopping the hall outside. Hanzo can still claim partial consciousness, head balanced on one hand, tea unfinished, and eyes barely open. Genji sprawls on his back, legs still under the blankets and and tank top rucked up to his ribs, snoring loudly. The game goes into overtime and she yawns over a yawn, pulling her sweater tight as a chill runs through her.

“Taeko,” Sojiro whispers, and how she loves the way he says her name, making it sound sweet and soft and small enough to cradle, all the things she's never been. He rubs circles into her back, making her arch into it. “You should go to bed, you must be exhausted.”

“No, I need to make it to eleven.” She rubs one eye, smearing what's left of her makeup. “Only way to beat jetlag, I can't give up now. Oh, did the Morikawas come through?”

“Just barely,” Sojiro nods, then shifts closer, encouraging her to lay her head on his shoulder. His touch is so light, and his body so warm without a suit jacket in the way, she nearly nods off right there. The room feels close and fuzzy, this side of too hot and filled with the television hum and the snuffling sounds of her sons at rest.

“It's so good to have you home,” Sojiro's voice comes like a nighttime breeze against her hair, and she responds in kind, answering from a need well-met and hoping she speaks for all of them. How lucky she is- they are, in spite of everything.

***

He pities the poor bastard who had to tell him she was dead, her blood still on his shirt. The courtesy of telling him to his face in private would be repaid with a lifetime of jaw pain. But that's a pinch compared to what he did to the rest of them after they were delivered to his office door. There had been no hints, no suggestive intel- on a busy street, and no one even saw who did it. Hanzo was there, he heard it at the same time but Genji- Genji had to be collected from school and Sojiro had to look into those perfect likenesses of her eyes and tell him-

They don't kill people.
They are beneath the law, their wealth bled from the vices of others, but they aren't animals. They had been appointed protectors once, sanctioned mercenaries before history played them a different card and forced them underground. Threats are their preferred weapon now, as powerful as the stories they stake their reputation on. People get roughed up as a last resort, pushed out, encouraged to take care of themselves. This is the twenty-first century, and there is no possible justification for shooting a woman through the heart in broad daylight.

“Someone knew,” he growls out, tinged with iron from a raw throat as he hauls their longest-serving lieutenant up by the lapels. “And unless it was a ghost, someone still knows. You are going to find them and bring them to me-alive. If the police get to them first, that will not reflect well on you.”

He lets the man drop and he scrambles away, like an injured hare. Sojiro stands to his full height slowly, straightening his tie and smoothing back his hair. The anesthetizing reprieve granted by his stinging, swelling knuckles fades, his ears ringing loud and his ribs digging in like talons as he struggles to catch his breath.

His oldest uncle-the one his father had liked the least, calling him envious and gutless in private-speaks in the displeased tone one would use with a child. “If you can’t restrain your hysterics, perhaps you shouldn’t be here.”

Sojiro laughs, dry and rattling, and purposefully clips the old man’s shoulder with his own on the way out. “And if you think you can give me orders, perhaps it's time you went in a fucking home.”

He loses his stride when he pushes through the heavy wooden doors. His sons sit in the plain leather chairs in the hallway, right where he left them. Genji’s crumpled and clinging to Hanzo, still weeping against his neck. Hanzo neither leans into it nor pushes him away, his eyes purposefully empty, lowered and staring into the middle distance. Sojiro did that to him. And there’s no undoing it now. Not with war at their doorstep.

“Come on, boys,” he creaks out as he urges them up. “Let’s go home.”

A joke, bordering on hilarious. There is no home now, just four walls and a more reliable security system. Genji trips over his feet, a sob startling out of him. Sojiro’s arm goes around his shoulders, holding him up until they get to the car. In the tense dark of the backseat, he sees tears streaming down Hanzo’s cheeks, but can’t bear to look any higher.

***

A year goes by. The police officers whose children they’ve watched grow up and whose elderly mothers they’ve supported shake their heads, tired and dispirited. With all attention turned towards their little village, nothing comes easily. He stays at the main office and works for hours, their legitimate branches moving double-time to keep the money flowing. Hang on to the future, their sons need one. He sleeps there or in the impersonal common rooms at the Shimada estate. She finds him in his dreams anyways. Calling out from the family plot, haunting him and asking why. Always why.

He has eyes everywhere short of the sky and nothing to show for it. There is no mea culpa, no accompanying checkmate, not even an attempted assault let alone anything more hostile. Genji and Hanzo attend school with protection on their heels. His closest staff have to remind him to attend their graduations. He can barely remember what day it is.

Hanzo shows up tirelessly every morning and doesn't argue for long when Sojiro sends him home at suppertime. Strong and reliable, just as she had been. Genji drops by to subtly plead with him to come home, but he’s either gone or hungover when Sojiro finally makes it there. He doesn't blame
him, poor little sparrow.

He's grown inexplicably skittish. The guards knocking on the door to quietly inform him when they change shifts makes him jump. The phone ringing makes him jump. The lid of his flask opening too loudly makes him jump. His life becomes a series of delays. Just one more minute, just a moment longer and he'll have to go home just a little later. The longer he waits to sleep, the slower morning comes and the later he has to face Hanzo, the later he'll have to take another phone call from Genji, the later he has to stand before anyone in all his failure. It takes him so long to get out of his car one morning that the secretary runs out to check on him.

It's 1:38am, which means it's another four hours and twenty-two minutes until the guards outside switch again. He swears it was a little after midnight when he opened this email, but he hasn't written a word. He stands, slightly unsteady on his feet, and shuffles towards the window. Hanamura is dark aside from the bars, gambling dens, and convenience stores, glowing dots of activity from up here. Their offices are some of the only high-rises around. Not like the big cities. That's what the residents like to brag about, that small town atmosphere where everyone knows everyone.

The glass of the window is cold against his arm where his sleeve is rolled up. Nausea wells up when he looks down, but not much more than usual, his lungs fluttering as they try to breathe it out. Early on, he'd wake up in a haze and forget everything for a few blissful moments, but that's stopped, thankfully. He couldn't stand the stab of realization that came after.

He did this to her.

The why, how, and who of her murder eludes him, but he did this to her. He marked her for death when he let her in on every secret, never concealing how much she knew or how much influence she had- No, he did it when he brought her inside Shimada Castle, when he called her his, when he let his children call her mother. It would have been so much better for him to take the bullet. She would keep a handle on things, she'd cry over him and take her revenge in the same day. She'd look after the boys. Hanzo would do so well with her at his ear. Instead, he was stuck with him. All three of them were.

*It should have been you.*

He rocks, forehead digging against his arm. His left shoulder is pulled and throbbing from sleeping on the decorative leather sofa. Sweat gathers at his temples as he feels a fever come over him. He doesn't want to go home. Not yet, not again. He's a coward, and he'd rather spend a hundred years in the dark, dead quiet of right now than go home and face it over and over and over again.

*Please.*

There is nothing good about him, there never has been- not if it's led to this. No matter how much he's emptied himself and bent and tried, he's still come up short in every conceivable way. There is no going back, no doing better, unless he can somehow leave himself behind. They've been right all along-

*I can't do this-*

The ache turns searing, shooting up through his chest, into his jaw- worse than any headache. He gasps and stumbles back, weakly crumpling to the floor and hitting his head with an impossibly loud bang. Exhaustion suddenly overwhelms him- *Genji, Hanzo-* -and then, quiet.

***
“You're sure Mondatta doesn't mind?”

“I asked, it's cool. Closest thing we're gonna get to a temple around here, anyway.”

Hanzo nods, shuffling up the centre path of the pavilion. All earthen reds and oranges on the inside, the silver bells swinging in the laboured August breeze. There's rows of cushions on either side, almost like a makeshift theatre. Genji snags two with a confidence that reassures Hanzo. His brother's spent enough time here, he only has to follow his lead.

The altar is long and low, made of the same plain, dark wood that much of the monastery furniture is fashioned from. Recently dusted, lined with printed photos in solid frames and freshly picked flowers standing in water. A few tall beeswax candles sit half-melted, wicks black and ashy, a brass bowl filled with white sand in the centre. Genji sets out a copy of their parents' wedding photo and carefully unwraps the paper from the tangerines while Hanzo peels the plastic off the strong-smelling incense, flicking one of Jesse's gaudy gold lighters several times before Genji looks over and laughs at him. “You've never smoked anything in your life, have you? Here, let me.”

“I like matches better,” Hanzo retorts as Genji gets it in one go. “They're more satisfying.”

“Yeah, sure,” Genji snickers, the smokey scent filling their nostrils as he waves away the tiny flame, setting it upright in the dish. Hanzo can't comfortably sit in seiza anymore, crossing his legs instead while Genji kneels but noticeably favours his good side. They used to do this several times each year. There was a bone-deep sense of ritual then, a rhythm that kept the seasons moving.

Hanzo hasn't any prayers to offer, so empties his mind instead. A skill he's been practicing weekly to incremental success. Letting the ceaseless thoughts drop away and trusting that they'll come back, that nothing bad will happen while they're gone. The air enfolds them in warmth, heavy and liquid, the shade of the pavilion's peaked roof a pleasant interruption in the too-bright sun.

He swears he can feel Genji beside him, sitting strong and straight-backed. Stable, but not rigid. He listens to their breath amidst the tinkling of the bells, his brother's more measured than his. So at home here, completely at peace and self-possessed in grey and black board shorts and his favourite orange tank top. His most phenomenal spit in the Shimadas' face is the one they will never see, and the one Hanzo may never fully comprehend.

Their shoulders seem to ease at the same time, settling back and opening their eyes. “You know, I think they might have been the only chance we had.”

Hanzo nods, hands flexing in his lap. “I think you might be right.”

Genji blows out a small breath, shifting in place. The pale green of his tattoo glistens in the shafts of yellow light, the same shade as their mother's. He'd forced their cousins' hands after her death, the first Shimada in perhaps all their centuries to override their decision. Hanzo hums, the pair sitting silent while the incense smoke loops around them. “As compelling as Zen's ideas are, I'm not as certain about the afterlife. But I still like to think there's something peaceful over there- like, maybe they can see us from wherever they are?”

“If that's true, then we'll both have a lot of explaining to do when we get there.” They share a laugh, easy and unafraid. “Me more so than you.”

“You think so?” Genji snorts, drawing his legs up to hug them. “Nah, I think they'd be happy that you're happy. If they can see us and they're themselves, then I'm sure they're as proud of you as I am.”
“For what?” Hanzo asks, rubbing the back of his neck where it's sticky with sweat. “There's nothing worth praising about such an ordinary life.”

“Of course there is!” Genji's eyes brighten considerably, glasses tucked away in his backpack. “You're making money from your art, you're trying new things and taking care of yourself- you're doing really well!” Genji's soft, still-enigmatic smile turns impish as he locks his fingers together. “Plus, you and Jesse are so good together- I swear, something in the universe is rooting for you two besides me.”

“ Took me long enough,” Hanzo snorts, pushing his hair up where it hangs limp over his forehead. “You're the one they'd be proud of, the life you've built for yourself is- remarkable. Much more than mine.”

“Or maybe we're both doing great, and our dead parents' approval isn't a competition for either of us to win?” Genji snaps with both hands and waggles his pointer fingers at Hanzo, conceit in his grin. “Just a thought.”

“Ah, sorry,” Hanzo ducks his head, forces a smile, and pleads with himself for honesty. He has to ration himself even now, offering little pieces of truth that still come away too raw. “It's- difficult for me not to feel ashamed, for many reasons.”

“It's okay, I get it,” Genji nods at him, arms loosening but not reaching for him, the space between their cushions slim and comfortably uncrossable. “I wish they'd lived long enough for me to buy them a bottle of wine and apologize- mostly to Kaa-san. But then we'd have never- Fuck, I dunno, I just wish I'd been better sooner.”

“Don't say that. You were a child, you have nothing to feel guilty for.” Hanzo says in a rush, trying to hurry away Genji's frown. He's yet to put words to his old resentment, to truly admit it was there at all. The selfish weakness of it cuts him deep. “I should have taken responsibility and gotten you away from there, made things better for you- both of us.”

“Right, right,” Genji nods enthusiastically, a serious frown thinning his scarred lips. “Because a recently-orphaned college kid who's been gaslit his whole life is totally qualified to assess that situation and unfuck it for himself and his manic younger sibling. Totally.”

Hanzo's mouth pulls to one side. “I was being serious.”

“So am I. Can't you tell? This is my serious face,” Genji leans in with a mock-frown, inches from his brother's face. Hanzo shoves him backwards and Genji cackles while they push themselves to standing. They tidy up and text Jesse, leaving the photo in its plastic frame and the offerings to be taken by animals or secretly cleared away by the monks. The two shuffle out, heads bent like old dolls and quiet but for the birds chirping as they pluck berries from the rowan saplings in the courtyard.

Passing through the kitchen on their way out, the brothers find Ditya peeling potatoes with Jyoti. After a stern warning about returning their tupperware (“Don't come at me, Zen's the one hoarding it!”) and a promise from Genji that he'll return for kids' soccer on Thursday, she presses containers of excess momos into their hands. Assuring them they made too many, she quickly pecks their cheeks and half-jokingly urges Hanzo to drop Genji off any time, since they're used to babysitting him.

Dust kicks up under their feet, staining the seams of their sneakers gritty brown as they slouch down the road. “That was a lie, you know. They never make more than they need, vows of poverty and all.” Genji taps the side of his nose with a smile. “That woman's a bloodhound for sadness, she can sniff it out a mile away.”
Hanzo chuckles warmly, one arm tight around the small container. “Ah, well. It was a very nice lie.”

A Jeep rattles up the road, loud in the slightly secluded street. Genji steps off the curb to bend his artificial knee and teasingly hike up the leg of his shorts, making Hanzo laugh. The car shudders to a stop in front of them, Zenyatta leaning out the passenger side window with his chin propped on one finely-manicured hand. “Good evening, gentlemen. Going our way?”

“You know it!” Genji bounds forward, planting one on his boyfriend while Hanzo loops around to the other side, Jesse catching his arm gently on the way by.

“Hey darlin’, got you some of those English chocolate bars you like,” Jesse murmurs as Genji launches himself into the backseat, jerking his head back with a sweet grin. “They’re at the bottom of the bag, don’t let your brother get to ‘em.”

“You spoil me,” Hanzo smirks, stealing a quick kiss before hopping in, encountering Den happily guarding the bags of snacks while Genji coaxes the nearly-grown pup onto his lap with ear scratches.

Hanzo finds himself staring out the window while the others talk over each other about what movies are on the docket for tonight’s marathon. The scenery blurs together, a wash of trees and buildings in the summer haze, the smoke from Jesse's cigarillo drifting past on the wind. He's yet to find a trace of his mother in these streets, and yet here she lived, many years before her husband and sons were so much as an idea. Her too-early birth an unimaginable pain that turned into her last gift to them. A path to their lives, as full and mundane as hers must have been. Her memories of this place up in smoke, never asked about, but still etched invisibly, still there.

He feels the one-two tap of Genji's knuckles against his shoulder and turns, his brother peering curiously at him and his voice low enough to go unheard in the front seat. “You okay?”

Hanzo nods, smiling as Zen gives the most polite verbal thrashing to some idiot who cut them off. “Just daydreaming.”

Genji nods, the grin on his lips so light and effortless now. He sticks his head out the window when Den does, talking to the animal as if he's understood. Zen and Jesse chat pleasantly in front of them, discussing the strangest things they've seen at grocery stores in their musical voices. As they take the street that leads home, Hanzo lets his head drop contentedly back against the seat, awash in warmth.

End Notes

Whew, this one took some time! I promise lighter fare next time, this one was a bit of a trip. I've wanted to lay out all my Shimada parent headcanons in one go, so here we are! I gotta say- My favourite thing might be finally completing the trifecta of the three Shimada boys' "Oh no, they're cute" moments when they realize they have Feelings. Different as they are, they're all noodles in the end. Adorable sweet noodles

Also writing which traits got passed down from which side, I hope you all enjoyed those details too!

Taeko is 5'9" and Sojiro is 5'7" if anyone's curious, he sincerely doesn't mind the height difference and nor does Taeko, though she doesn't care for crowds for that reason

You have to be 20 to get a tattoo in Japan but uh, definitely not the most illegal thing any of the Shimadas are up to
Sojiro's story in the bath scene is paraphrased from the end of Chapter 12 of Journey to the West. When you have to keep two little boys entertained every night with an expanded bedtime story universe, you occasionally get a little derivative.

Re: The magazine thwap: I'm not one to make light of parents hitting their kids, and it's not something I support given the damage it can do, but given Sojiro's and Taeko's fairly traditional family backgrounds, they probably got smacks as kids and doled out a few of their own to Genji and Hanzo. Again, not something I support, but it fits who they are and how they grew up.
Re: Sojiro's death: Stress won't give you a heart attack, but prolonged cortisol + genes + a lifetime of smoking + long-term lack of sleep/general poor health and lack of social supports definitely stacks the deck against you. Take care of yourselves out there, my friends <3

Thank you for reading!

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