Love is Found in a Dragon's Heart
by kakera

Summary

After freeing Ibushi from the magic mirror, Akoya has a new and exciting purpose--and a plan to see through.
But that plan isn’t as easy to realise as they had hoped, and together with Kinshirou and Atsushi, they face a number of new challenges.
Relationships are forged, goodbyes are said, discoveries are made and risks are taken, until Ibushi and Akoya find themselves facing a century-old curse so strong that it may be unbreakable.

Notes

This is a direct continuation of 'Love is Glimpsed in a Magic Mirror'. You probably don't need to have read it, but this will make a lot more sense if you have!

I wanted to keep this section of the story separate from the previous, because the ending I wrote for Magic Mirror is the ending I'd envisaged from the start. But having finished it, I found other ideas springing to mind, and other scenes I wanted to write. So having taken a little break from writing, I began to write this one!

I wrote the first two chapters across a couple of days, and chapter three (unfinished at time of posting this) is going to be much longer...in fact this was another one that should have been a
simple one-shot, but I had too many ideas and everything has finally slotted into place in my head.

Which is handy, because it's helped me figure out the title (which has evaded me from the word go). And now I can start posting. And writing more. Yay!

Hope you enjoy this! First chapter is very akorima-centric, but kinatsu make their debut in the next :)
There are moments in life when change is inevitable. There are moments when a path has been chosen, and all bridges have been burned, and there is no way to turn back, only step forward into the unknown.

There are moments when life feels suspended in time, when breaths catch in throats and hearts race, all because eyes met and smiles formed, smiles that spoke of secrets and love and joy. A moment like this deserved to be broken only by a kiss, by that joy bursting forth from pounding hearts as fingers tangled in hair and breaths mingled and lips met once, and again, languid and lingering and loving.

As he stood there in his bedroom, lost in Ibushi's gaze, Akoya knew that this moment couldn't end any other way. Ibushi was finally free, and the magic mirror could never imprison anyone again.

Kinshirou and Atsushi had quietly taken their leave, hopefully to make up for all the time wasted over the past months. To love each other without guilt, without restraint.

Akoya wanted that too, with Ibushi. And he could have it, because Ibushi was right there, holding him, being held by him. His smile had such a softness and his eyes were so full of warmth that Akoya's body tingled all over. Nothing but a kiss could make him happier at this moment.

He'd never kissed anyone before. Palace life and his position as prince (and admittedly his attitude in the past) had prevented any kind of romantic encounter.

But he wanted to kiss Ibushi.

Judging by the look in his eyes, Ibushi wanted to kiss him, too.

They were alone.

They loved each other.

The moment was perfect.

As the tingling gave way to a nervous fluttering, Akoya reached up, threading his fingers into Ibushi's hair and leaning in. Ibushi's lips looked so soft, so inviting...

"I demand to know what is going on!"

They tore apart when the bellowing voice of the king echoed through the room. Face hot, Akoya glared at his father, ashamed to have been caught like this, and furious to have been interrupted.

Nearby, Ibushi dropped to one knee, hand pressed to his chest and gaze lowered in a formal bow that was a century out of date.

"Your Majesty," he murmured

The subservience in his tone made Akoya even angrier. Propriety be damned, the King of Perla did not deserve Ibushi's subservience, nor his respect!

The king ignored the kneeling man, and fixed Akoya with a steely gaze. "I was informed that you had awoken, and were in good health. So tell me why it is that I find you here in the arms of a stranger, and why the priest tells me that he has been asked to perform a wedding ceremony tomorrow?" He shook as he spoke, face red and eyes narrowed, his voice becoming louder with
every word. "A ceremony for Aurum's heir and that Epinard fool! The very idiot to whom you are engaged! What is the meaning of this? And who is this man?"

Akoya was filled with rage, but not blinded by it as his father was. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew this gave him an advantage. He had to remain calm in order to win this.

"Father," he uttered, allowing a practised humility to seep into his voice. He took a step forward, hands splayed in deference. "Please forgive me for not informing you sooner. I--"

"You had better have a good explanation for this!"

"Of course, father. I wrote it all in a letter." Akoya plucked the letter from beside the bed, and bowed as he handed it over. "I'm certain you will be pleased by the change of plans."

The king scowled as he snatched the letter. "Zundar!" he shouted for Akoya's aide whilst he tore through the seal. "What do you know of this letter?"

Zundar slunk into view, uncertainty flashing across his gaze when he peeked into the room. "Letter, your majesty?"

"This letter!" The king waved it in his face. "What do you know?"

"Nothing, your majesty," Zundar replied. "I know no further than his highness requesting his writing box, and bidding me leave him."

"I see..." The king frowned, unfolding the parchment. "You shall learn of it now. I shall read it aloud."

As the king cleared his throat, Akoya retreated to Ibushi's side, resting a hand upon his shoulder. "Stand up, Ibushi," he whispered.

"But his majesty--"

"Stand up."

Ibushi stood, but kept his gaze lowered, the king in his peripheral vision. Though his expression remained passive, his shoulders were rigid and his hands clenched tightly at his sides.

"My dear father," the king began, a sneer upon his lips. "When you read this, I shall be gone--Well, you got that wrong," he chuckled.

"Plans have changed since I wrote that letter," Akoya replied, pursing his lips.

"You are rather poor at planning then, aren't you?" The king shot a smug glance at Zundar and continued to read. "I am well aware that my disappearance will both anger and please you, and apologise that I have been a disappointment. - Hah! You are more self-aware than I thought, son! - However, you'll find that I have set plans in motion that solve all troubles you may have.

"First, the issue of my undesired presence: it is solved, for I am gone.

"Second, the resulting issue of my absence, which will prevent a marriage between his Highness the Prince Atsushi and myself. --So this is your motive!" The king glared. "You have been trying to prevent your marriage since the start! I won't have it. The wedding shall proceed, and I--"

"Read the rest!" Akoya snapped, fury flaring up in his mind whilst pain gripped his heart. His father really hated him, didn't he?
"Speak to me in that manner again and I shall burn it, and cast you out."

"Please, father. Read the rest," Akoya repeated, quieter than before.

Ibushi glanced at him, gaze darkening. This was the first time he'd witnessed the king with his own eyes and ears. Akoya hadn't exaggerated when he'd spoken of him.

"I'll continue, but you have been warned." The king gripped the letter tightly, scowling at the words. "As you recently informed me, Perla's advantage to this marriage is that I will no longer be present within the palace. Epinard's advantage is to place Atsushi as rightful heir to Epinard's throne, and thus prevent a war.

"Through my absence, you and his Majesty the King of Epinard have a problem. Yet your problems can be solved through a union that should have been considered first and foremost:

"Prince Atsushi of Epinard will wed Prince Kinshirou of Aurum.

"Both kingdoms will benefit from the union, as will the princes themselves. Perla has never needed to strengthen its ties with either, as our trade and our political relations are stronger than ever--and with the plans I have in mind, shall become stronger." The anger in the king's face was overcome with confusion, and then surprise. "Perla shall, in future, become a kingdom with closer allies, due to a marriage that has long been foreseen but is yet to take place: that of my cousin Prince Ryuu of Vesta to his consort, Prince Io of Gaia.

"For I, Akoya Gero, Prince of Perla and its tributaries, do hereby renounce my right to the throne in favour of Prince Ryuu Zaou of Vesta. Ryuu will be a popular king, and with Prince Io at his side, the kingdoms of Perla, Vesta, and Gaia shall become a super-power rich in trade and assets. United, these kingdoms shall be stronger than any other. For the sake of Perla and its good, hard-working people, I pray that you give this your blessing.

"I am gone, father. There will be a man here in my stead, a man of good breeding and unrivalled manners. Please treat him as you would any visiting dignitary, and allow Kinshirou and Atsushi to attend to him as their guest. He is a good man, worthy of the best that Perla can provide.

"Father, I hope you are not angered by this letter. I may have ruined your plans, but I am gone, so by all means forget my existence.

"Thank you, father, for the time and privileges you have bestowed upon me during the eighteen years of my life. I remain as ever, your loving son..."

Akoya winced as the king trailed off, and bowed his head. His father's voice had become much quieter as he read the second half of the letter, and his mood was hard to tell.

All Akoya's confidence in his plan - in gaining his father's agreement - melted away as he stood there, waiting for his father to speak.

Nothing had turned out as he'd planned. He'd intended to switch places with Ibushi, and for Kinshirou and Atsushi to return and bring Ibushi to safety soon after.

He hadn't expected Ibushi to smash the mirror before it could suck him inside. That had changed everything.

There was no turning back now. Not that Akoya really wanted to. Ibushi had made a wonderful proposal, given him a purpose. He wanted nothing more than to escape the kingdom with him.
But he feared what his father might say if he knew, and feared worse what he might do.

"Akoya..." The King folded the letter, regarding him. "I am surprised. Clearly your tutoring in political strategy has not gone to waste. But you have not answered the question of who this man is, and I would also like to know where you intended to go."

Akoya lifted his head, eyes widening slightly. His father's comments had been as good as a compliment. Yet questions remained unanswered, and his father wouldn't like - wouldn't believe - the answers. He had to think, and fast. Lying was unseemly, but the truth was ludicrous.

"Father," Akoya cleared his throat, head held high. "Allow me to introduce Ibushi Arima, crown prince of--" Faltering, Akoya looked to Ibushi. He was still reeling from the revelation that Ibushi was a prince - the prince of Argent, nonetheless! - but belatedly realised he couldn't tell his father that. In the modern world, Argent was no more than a myth.

Ibushi smiled, bowing once more in his old-fashioned manner. "Your Majesty, I am but a humble prince of a small and oft-forgotten nation so unimportant as to escape the notice of map-makers."

The king eyed Ibushi suspiciously. "One of those ragamuffin island kingdoms, then."

"And wholeheartedly loyal to the great kingdom of Perla," Ibushi agreed, straightening up again.

"Ibushi and I shall be travelling together," Akoya said, wanting to distract his father from the subject of Ibushi's heritage.

"Travelling where?" The king pressed.

"Wherever is necessary, but we shall be leaving Perla."

The king frowned, puzzlement upon his features. "You speak like a knight of old, my son. A man with a quest. Those fairy tales you've been reading have put strange ideas into your head. I shall have them removed from the library at once."

"No!" Akoya stared, horrified at the prospect of losing all that magic. "Father, I just--"

"No excuses. You're an adult, and it is long past time to put away childish beliefs."

"They aren't beliefs!" Akoya trembled, staring at his father. "It's true that I've been researching into the old beliefs, but through that I...I..." He swallowed, shaking his head. There was no way to explain himself without sounding delusional.

"His Highness has found valuable hidden knowledge within those books," Ibushi spoke softly, yet there was a commanding air to his words. His gaze and his posture no longer suggested subservience, instead becoming every inch the prince he was. He beheld the king with a noble smile. "Your Majesty, your son is an asset to this kingdom."

Akoya narrowed his eyes. What good was it to tell his father about the knowledge he'd gained? His father would want to know what was so valuable about fairy tales! He didn't believe in magic!

"...I am beginning to see that," the king muttered. He frowned, as if agreeing was an annoyance, and gazed at them expectantly. "What is this knowledge, my son? And why is it so valuable?"

"It..." Akoya looked to Ibushi, helpless. He couldn't tell his father about the magic, so what was Ibushi planning?!
Ibushi smiled gently. "I think it's best to show his majesty what you can do," he said.

Akoya stared. Not long ago, Ibushi admonished him for using magic. Now he was telling him to use it?

"Son?" The king regarded the pair, hands on his hips. "What do you have to show me?"

Gulping, Akoya met his gaze. "Magic, father."

The king's enraged bellow echoed down the corridor in response.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Whilst Kinshirou and Atsushi come up with solutions, the king presents Akoya and Ibushi with a problem of an entirely different sort.

Chapter Notes

This is the last sensible length chapter I wrote. Will be chopping the others up into smaller, more-digestible parts (because chapter three is as 3-4 times longer than this one!)

"This feels like a weird dream..."

Atsushi let out a sigh and rolled onto his side, head coming to rest against Kinshirou's shoulder. It was late, and his body felt heavy and achy, and his eyelids drooped over his tired eyes, and Kinshirou's bed was so comfortable.

But his thoughts wouldn't settle, and now the joy of his engagement to Kinshirou had subsided, he was worried.

Beside him, Kinshirou's mind was working overtime. After leaving Akoya and the unknown prince to themselves, they'd hurried to his quarters and Atsushi had told him what he knew of the situation.

If not for Atsushi being so sensible, he might not have believed him.

"It is certainly unreal..." Thoughtful, Kinshirou turned his head, nuzzling Atsushi's hair. The facts were hard to accept, and he couldn't say he understood. The truth defied logic and science. But there was no reasonable explanation, only this:

Magic existed.

Akoya's mirror - now smashed to a million pieces - had been magic. From what Atsushi had told him, it could be assumed to have imprisoned a mortal man. A prince.

The prince of Argent, a kingdom thought to exist only in myth.

The prince of Argent, who had been standing there in Akoya's bedroom, in Akoya's arms.

Considering what he'd seen and heard, they were in love.

And Akoya, before the appearance of the prince, had broken off his engagement with Atsushi and effectively forced them to get engaged.

Not that Kinshirou minded. An engagement to Atsushi had always been something of a dream.
A tiny smile tugged at his lips. Slightly over a year ago, a pale-faced Atsushi had told him he'd been engaged to some unknown foreign prince, and Kinshirou thought he'd lost his chance of happiness. They'd been courting for fourteen months at the time, and though Kinshirou had thought of marriage, it felt all too soon to propose.

So they'd decided to make the most of it whilst they could, before Atsushi's marriage to this mystery foreign prince.

Akoya had been the last person Kinshirou had expected Atsushi to become engaged to. He'd tried to be glad for them. Akoya was his friend, after all, and could be nice once he stopped behaving like a brat. But from the first time Kinshirou saw them together, he couldn't bear the sight of them, nor the thought that he'd lose Atsushi to his best friend.

His behaviour since then had been shameful. He'd tried to end his affair with Atsushi and had ignored him--had ignored Akoya too. But he was weak to Atsushi's imploring gaze, weak to the desires of his own heart. The affair didn't end, and when he couldn't find comfort in Atsushi's arms, he'd found it in the consciousness-clouding, stringent taste of alcohol.

Kinshirou felt as though he'd been living a nightmare, only to wake up and find himself in a beautiful dream.

"This is reality," he said, more to himself than to Atsushi.

Atsushi smiled against Kinshirou's skin. "That's why I said it feels like a dream, Kinchan."

"It does."

"Though I worry what the king will say."

Kinshirou hummed in agreement, the words weighing in his chest. "Akoya was confident his majesty will agree..." He frowned slightly. "I'm doubtful he can persuade him as easily as he thinks. The king is strong-willed."

"So is Akoya." Atsushi yawned and curled an arm around Kinshirou's waist. "But the king is the king. His word is law."

"What is your father going to say about our engagement?" Kinshirou asked, uncertainty causing the words to catch in his throat.

Atsushi lifted his head, and Kinshirou experienced a stab of guilt for the anxiety in his eyes.

But then Atsushi's expression softened, and he smiled. "He likes you a lot, Kinchan. He'll be angry that I acted against his plans, but he'll approve of my choice. So long as we marry before my sister, I'll be the heir to Epinard's throne, and the kingdom will be safe. Epinard's safety is father's only concern."

Kinshirou reached up, fingers tracing Atsushi's jaw and carding through his hair, brushing it back from his face. "You're still worried," he remarked.

"You too..."

"...yes. Until we are standing before the priest, I--" Kinshirou looked away.

"Me too," Atsushi leaned in, planting a kiss on his lips. "I won't believe this is real until it's happening."
"Mm." Kinshirou fell silent as he mulled over the revelations of this evening.

Atsushi lay there and watched him, admiring the subtle changes in Kinshirou's eyes, the way they seemed to sparkle in the light of the dying candles. Silence like this was comfortable. He knew Kinshirou was thinking, was contemplating possibilities and solutions and outcomes. He knew that if something went awry, Kinshirou would find a way to handle it.

Chest warm, Atsushi resumed his position, nuzzling against his shoulder. Then he became lost in his own thoughts as he waited for Kinshirou to speak.

The king's shouting had roused some of the palace guards. They arrived at Akoya's quarters in time for the end of his furious tirade.

"After all this you expect me to believe you've discovered magic? Magic?! I always thought you fanciful, I did not realise you were delusional."

"Father please!" Akoya yelled. He barely noticed the guards filling the reception room beyond his bedroom. He was too distraught to find that his father didn't believe him.

"I won't hear any more of this!"


"Guards!" The king barked across the room. "Put this stranger under arrest! He has no business being here."

"He does! I brought him here!" Akoya protested, heart thumping.

The king sighed. "Take away my son, too. He needs to learn a lesson."

The guards advanced towards the door, their expressions stony. Akoya knew they had no love for him. Very few people did.

"Akoya..." Ibushi edged closer, his tone urgent

The king turned away to leave, and Akoya lifted a trembling hand, eyes wide as he rapidly uttered an incantation.

All at once the door slammed shut, the guards on one side, the king and a silent Zundar on the other. The door groaned in its frame and the hinges shrieked in complaint, and from the other side came muffled voices, surprised and confused.

The king scowled and reached for the handle, but couldn't push the door open.

"Stop pushing it, you idiots!" he screamed through the groaning wood.

"With respect, your majesty, we're pulling," called back one of the guards.

"What tomfoolery is this?!" The king was red with rage.

Ibushi cleared his throat. "It is your son's magic, your majesty."

The king wheeled around. "There is no such thing! The wind caught the door and it is now stuck. A carpenter will be called to repair it."
"It was magic," Akoya insisted. He lowered his hand, and all at once the door stopped groaning. "I called the door to me, but since it's fixed to the wall, it could only close."

"It was the wind," the king insisted. "Or trickery."

"It was magic! I can do it agai--"

"I'll not listen to the ravings of a damned lunatic!"

Akoya's shoulders hunched and he bowed his head, breath stolen from him by the cruel words

"Even when magic is what this is?" Ibushi quietly wrapped Akoya's hand in his own, reassured when he felt a light squeeze from Akoya's fingers. He gazed at the king, a cold smile upon his lips that caused the man to falter. "The only lunacy in the kingdom, your majesty, is the refusal to see what is right before you."

The king glared. "You are the cause of this. You have turned my son's mind and brought shame upon my kingdom."

Before Ibushi could reply, the king had drawn his dagger and advanced upon them, deaf to Akoya's shout of dismay.

"We could go to Aurum," Kinshirou spoke after some time, lifting his head from where it rested against Atsushi's.

"Aurum? Why?" Atsushi had started to doze, and now blinked dopily at his fiancé.

"If his majesty doesn't approve our engagement, we can marry in my home kingdom. My parents approval is unnecessary."

"But Akoya wanted us to marry within two days. My sister's wedding will happen soon..."

"Hence Aurum. It's the closest, only a day and a half over the Northern Sea. Less, if we take a lighter ship. After our wedding, we can cross the border into Epinard and announce your news personally, as is proper."

"We might make it in time."

"If we leave tomorrow morning, yes."

"...but Akoya asked us to help his friend."

Kinshirou arched a brow. "In his absence, yes. It looked to me as if this 'friend' of his is capable of helping himself."

A sleepy laugh escaped Atsushi's throat. "Mm, they were close. I never imagined that Argent was real."

"But where is it?" Kinshirou wondered. "How could the world forget it so fast?"

"Magic?"

"Hm."
Atsushi smiled a Kinshirou's expression. "Just because you cannot see it, doesn't mean it can't exist..." He laughed softly then, because shortly after meeting Akoya, he'd had a similar conversation. Back then, neither of them had believed in magic--but they had both wanted to.

"I know that. But science has disproven magic."

"Yet Akoya's consort appears to have come from nowhere. Then there's the mirror..."

"It's the only possibility," Kinshirou sighed. His mind was tired, his body exhausted, and he wanted to sleep. But he wouldn't, not all the time these thoughts were swirling through his head. "Even if it makes no sense."

"Magic doesn't have to make sense, does it?" Atsushi said quietly. "Do you have to see something to believe in it, Kinchan?"

Kinshirou hid a yawn behind his hand. "I believe in love? You can't see that."

Atsushi hummed and snuggled closer. "Maybe love is a form of magic..."

The tired mumble made Kinshirou smile. "Maybe. Love often doesn't make sense either."

"I love you."

Kinshirou kissed Atsushi's forehead, chest aglow with affection. "I love you too."

"We're engaged..."

"We are."

"We're going to get married." Atsushi's eyes slid closed, a smile upon his lips.

"We are. No matter what his majesty thinks."

"I'm happy."

Kinshirou smiled. "Me too. Go to sleep, Atchan. We'll talk more in the morning."

Atsushi sighed softly, already drifting into slumber.

As the king bore down upon Akoya and Ibushi, his blade glinting in the light, two things happened in rapid succession.

First, there was a rushing feeling, cool like the forest breeze against Akoya's cheeks, as something seemed to blur around Ibushi and himself. The air smelled metallic, full of energy. Ibushi had raised a hand, a scowl on his face, and Akoya pressed closer to him, confused as he focused on his father's dagger.

This was magic, but it wasn't his.

Akoya's own magic was the second thing that happened, ripping the dagger from his father's hand and hurling it into the ceiling. The blade quivered as it tried to rise further, hampered by the ornate carvings from which it protruded.

The king took a shaky step back, his hands raised in defence, and all at once the rushing stopped and
the blur disappeared.

Ibushi lowered his hand and beheld him. "I love your son, your majesty," he said bluntly, a new lowness to his voice that suggested quiet fury. "I would not see him hurt."

"That's..." The king was staring up at his dagger. He was no longer red with rage, but white with shock. "That's--This is all a trick!" he exclaimed. "You are playing childish games. You're taking advantage of this late hour, a time when our minds play tricks upon us."

Akoya sighed heavily. "What will it take for you to believe in this, father?"

"Proof!"

"Haven't we shown you enough proof?" Ibushi asked. This king was truly unreasonable!

"You have shown me a sleight of hand that any trickster could have performed. A door can be pulled shut by a wire!" The king clenched his fists. "Any worthy man of science could work out how you produced your shield of chains, and I suspect my dagger was snatched away during some kind of distraction technique."

"Strange that there is no shield in sight, is it not?" Ibushi had the smile on his face again, and the king seemed to pale further.

"If your dagger was snatched away, father, it wouldn't be embedded in the ceiling," Akoya pointed out. "Magic is real, even if you don't like it." To prove it, he called the dagger to his hand. After a moment of deliberation, he offered it back. The king looked too shaken to use it now.

"I'm still learning, but there is more to discover. Too much has been lost in the wake of science."

"Science is reality," the king replied, turning the dagger over in his hands as he inspected it for clues of a trick. Finding none, he scowled to himself and sheathed it. "Science is physical. Magic is illusion. Show me something physical, and I may consider believing you."

"Physical? I stole your dagger and shut the door without touching either!"

"Trickery," the king decided. "Any trickster could do that. If you insist upon the existence of magic, I'll need you to produce something no trickster could dream of."

Akoya frowned. There was little other magic he was confident in using, and certainly nothing his father couldn't brush off as trickery.

"See?" The king scoffed. "You have nothing."

"...Will a dragon do?"

Akoya and the king looked at Ibushi in surprise.

Ibushi smirked. "It isn't just magic that resides in your palace cellars, so I'm told."

"What do you know of--"

"I've been down there, father. There's an entire room packed full of old writings. And a dragon."

"That is nothing but a fairy story to keep children out of there," the king snorted. "The ceilings collapsed during my grandmother's reign. It's dangerous."
"It isn't dangerous, only dirty," Akoya replied. "If you don't believe me, take a look beneath the library."

The king stared at him. "You would have me clamber into the cellar like a rat? This is a joke to you, isn't it?"

"I'm serious," Akoya eyed his father, suddenly aware that the man was afraid. "Come into the cellar with me, father. Bring as many guards as you want. The dragon is dead, but it's there."

"And why should I waste my time with your mad schemes?"

Akoya frowned and glanced at Ibushi. Then he took a gamble. "If we find nothing, Ibushi and I shall leave Perla and never return."

A slow smile spread across the king's face. "I'll think about it. But it is too late at night for that now--Zundar!"

The aide, who had been standing silently by the door, snapped out of his shocked stupor. "Yes, your majesty?"

"Have rooms prepared for his highness' guest."

"Of course, your majesty." Zundar bowed, an expression akin to relief flickering across his pale face.

"Akoya, open the door," the king demanded.

"It can be opened, father," Akoya replied, suddenly tired. It was late, and the argument had worn him out. He wanted to tell his father that it was unnecessary to provide Ibushi with rooms, that Ibushi could stay right there with him. But he couldn't bear the thought of another fight.

He'd simply sneak to Ibushi's rooms later. Nobody could stop him. Nobody would know.

Zundar opened the door, revealing a group of surprised-looking guards on the other side. The king dismissed them with a wave of his hand, and paused in the doorway to look back at his son. "You have until tomorrow evening to show me proof. If I am unsatisfied, I shall have to think of what to do with you. Both of you."

His piece said, the king swept from the room.

Akoya turned to Ibushi at once, needing his advice, his counsel, needing him more than ever.

But Zundar spoke up first, his manner stiff, gaze conflicted. "If his highness would like to follow me, I can show him to a guest suite. It will be prepared at once."

Akoya pouted, teeth clenched. "Then by all means prepare the rooms that are closest," he said, not tearing his gaze from Ibushi's. "Prince Ibushi and I have a lot to discuss."

"I believe his majesty intends for his subjects to turn in for the night," Zundar replied firmly.

Akoya opened his mouth to object, but Ibushi spoke up first.

"Then I must take my leave," he said, dropping to one knee in that charmingly outdated way of his and pressing a kiss to the back of Akoya's hand. His lips lingered there, and Akoya saw fondness in his gaze.

"Then I bid you a good night," he replied, lips twitching with a smile. In the past it had always been
Akoya who took his leave of Ibushi. How different it felt when their roles were reversed!

Ibushi rose to his feet and they gazed at each other, the air between them heavy with need, with expectation.

Then Zundar gave a pointed cough, and the moment was gone.

"This way please, your highness," he said, stepping out of the room.

Ibushi followed him, glancing back as he reached the threshold. A warm smile formed on his features, and he spoke softly, his words a caress to Akoya’s ears.

"Goodnight, beautiful prince."

Then the door closed behind him, and Akoya was left alone to wonder what his kiss might have felt like.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Faced with uncertainty, Kinshirou and Atsushi pretend they haven't just spent the night together.
With Ibushi imprisoned, Akoya no longer has his advice to seek, and must strike out on his own to prove the existence of magic, in order to free him (again).

Once Atsushi had gone to sleep last night, Kinshirou had remained awake for some time, thinking about what had happened, and how little he knew of it. Based on Atsushi's retelling of recent events, it seemed that magic was the only explanation, albeit implausible. Tired though he was, Kinshirou had turned the thought around in his head for hours, seeking alternatives, seeking proof, yet always coming up short of either proving or disproving the existence of magic. Eventually he fell asleep, full of uncertainty.

Waking the next morning to find Atsushi still slumbering beside him, Kinshirou found he believed that magic really could exist.

Because what else could it be, other than magic, that two people could find each other, and fall in love and be together, against all odds? There was no science or reason when it came to love, only knowing, only the tingle of a lingering touch, the tug of longing when eyes met across a room, the thrill of lips seeking lips and that deep sense of calm when, after a stressful day, his thoughts turned to Atsushi. What more could that be, other than magic?

Atsushi's eyes fluttered open then, a sleepy smile forming upon his face to find Kinshirou beside him. Kinshirou's breath caught in the back of his throat, and as Atsushi's fingers tangled in his hair and their lips met, he decided that magic was more probable than ever.

Ibushi awoke alone.

It wasn't uncommon, for most of his mortal life had been spent waking alone.

But this was the first time it felt lonely.

That dull, wistful ache in his chest served as a reminder of how many mornings he'd watched from the depths of the mirror as Akoya awakened, how many times he'd seen that serene slumbering face morph into one full of stress and tension the moment Akoya's eyes fluttered open. How that stress and tension had eased, over the weeks, whenever Akoya had looked at him, whenever they'd talked.

Ibushi lay there, thinking of him, wondering if he'd awoken yet, or if he was still lost in the land of dreams. He hoped he was still sleeping, but privately longed to see his face and hear his voice—to touch him.

A new warmth welled up in Ibushi's chest.

After months of being separated by glass and silver and magic, he could finally touch him, could
finally hold him like he longed to.

From outside the room came the sound of footsteps, and voices that didn't care to remain hushed.

Ibushi frowned, assuming it was a change of the guards outside his door. He'd heard Akoya arguing with them during the night, demanding to be let in only to be turned away on the king’s orders. The conversation had left him enraged, but there was nothing he could do other than hold on to the fact that Akoya had wanted to come to him in the night.

Still listening to the voices outside, Ibushi stretched out on the bed. His heart felt particularly fluttery, thinking of Akoya. He was still getting used to being in the real world again, and every feeling, every touch, every sensation was a hundred times stronger than he remembered.

Ibushi felt lucky that love was one of the first things he felt upon his freedom, and lamented that he and Akoya had no chance to seal their confessions with a kiss. Akoya's lips looked plump and warm and pliant, and no doubt tasted sweet.

Sighing, Ibushi brushed a fingertip over his lips. Would Akoya find him pleasing?

Next time they were alone, he would draw him close and find out.

Until then, he was stuck in this room, on his own. He'd explored it last night, after Zundar had left him and the door had been closed and the guards had been posted outside. The room was nowhere as lavish as Akoya's, but it was comfortably appointed, with a small bathroom off to one side, a wooden table and chairs, and most importantly, a bed.

Ibushi hadn't slept in a bed for over a hundred years, and was grateful that he'd spent most of those hundred years in magic-induced slumber. This bed was simple, but comfortable.

Head gently cradled by the pillows, Ibushi lay there and luxuriated in the way the mattress supported his limbs. It was firm yet soft, the bedding not at all scratchy like what he remembered of his time before the mirror. Beds had improved dramatically over the last century.

Ibushi wondered what else had changed for the better.

Then his stomach gurgled, and he began to wonder if he would be given breakfast.

He hadn't experienced hunger in a long time. Considering the guards, it was likely too much to hope that he might sate it with Akoya.

"Good morning, Ibushi..."

The words left Akoya's lips in a sigh, before he'd opened his eyes--before his mind caught up with the events of last night, and he remembered that Ibushi was no longer there with him.

Mood slumping, he sat up with a scowl and cast an eye about the room. The mirror fragments had been cleared up last night, the ornate frame removed. The space where the mirror once hung now looked barren and empty, and the room was too silent for his liking.

Unaware of how late or early it might be, Akoya got out of bed and padded to the bathroom to wash. He hadn't time to lounge around and wait for his staff to draw him a bath or bring him tea or help him dress (not that he'd allowed them to aid his dressing for some time). Today, a more urgent deed was on his agenda: he had to produce proof of magic, to convince his father of its existence.
He had no intention of letting his father know that he was going to leave with Ibushi anyway, eventually. He was serious about passing up his right to the throne in Ryuu's favour. The kingdom would love Ryuu, and nobles already spoke of him and Io with great admiration. Ryuu would be a far better heir to the throne--a far better king, when the time came.

That thought in mind, Akoya finished dressing, then sat down to write his cousin a brief letter. He had just finished it when Zundar entered the room.

"Good morning, your highness," Zundar greeted him with a polite smile. "His majesty expects you to breakfast."

"Of course," Akoya rose to his feet. "Will Ibushi be there?"

"His majesty requires that the gentleman in question remains in his quarters." Zundar spoke with his usual firmness, but his brow wrinkled in a manner that suggested uncertainty.

Aware he could use that uncertainty to his advantage, Akoya let out a sigh. "I see. It can't be helped, I suppose." Rising from his seat, he clasped the letter in his hands. "Will Dadacha be making macarons today?" he asked, knowing that Zundar's brother made them every morning.

"A fresh batch is already out of the oven, I believe," Zundar replied, a brotherly pride in his voice.

Akoya smiled. "Wonderful. Please ensure that all my staff are able to enjoy them, yourself included. Everyone works so hard, and deserves to eat Dadacha's delicious baking every day."

Zundar fought the urge to smile. "Of course, your highness."

"Thank you. Would you take some to Ibushi, too? I'd like him to try them."

"I regret that his majesty ordered--"

"Please?" Akoya fixed Zundar with an imploring gaze. "I've told him so much about Dadacha's cooking..."

"His majesty was very firm, your highness..." Zundar glanced towards the door, and only then did Akoya notice the guard standing outside. He had his back to them, but his stillness gave away the fact that he was eavesdropping.

Akoya frowned. So he was under house arrest too, now?

"Therefore I shall ensure that only those most deserving are able to sample your favourite macarons," Zundar stated, giving a subtle nod.

"That will have to do," Akoya effected a sigh, and looked at the letter in his hands. How was he to send this to Ryuu, without his father finding out? If he was under house arrest, then any communications would be intercepted, and perhaps never reach their destination.

Zundar took a step forward. "Is there anything else I can do for you this morning, your highness?" he asked, signalling to the letter.

Akoya's grip on the letter tightened. Could he trust Zundar? Though he'd been his chief aide for most of his life, Zundar was still a subject of the king. To whom was he most loyal?

But he had to trust him. He had no other choice.

"Thank you, but there's nothing I require at present," he nodded, handing the letter over. It
disappeared into Zundar's jacket in the blink of an eye, and the man's expression was once again passive.

"In that case, I shall escort you to breakfast."

"Thank you, Zundar."

For now, Akoya would have to play along with his father's wishes. But once he got to breakfast, where so many members of the court would be in earshot, the game was as much his as it was his father's--and Akoya resolved to triumph.

"I no longer know the young man who has the face of my son."

The king frowned as he took his seat at the breakfast table. Other members of the court were yet to be permitted entrance to the hall, so the only people in the room were the queen, and the king's most trusted staff.

Even so, he lowered his voice so none but his wife would hear him.

"Our boy is surely not so different," the queen replied, keeping her voice to the same level. She studied the colourful, jewel-encrusted rings upon her hand. "He was such a good boy as a young child..."

"And became so disgraceful," the king grumbled. His face was pale, and his hand felt sore from last night, when the dagger had been ripped harshly from his grasp. "I did not think I would father a lunatic."

"You will send him away soon enough." The queen folded her hands in her lap, ice-blue eyes fixed upon her husband's pasty visage. "The wedding will proceed as planned."

"Yes, yes, of course. Then he will be Epinard's problem," the king sighed. "That false prince is another matter. Where did he come from? The guards report no unusual visitors to the castle, nor have any intruders been sighted."

"Our guards need to pay more heed to the comings and goings of strangers."

"I will reprimand them, believe me."

"Good. I dislike feeling vulnerable in my own home."

The king raised a brow. "Perla has no enemies, dear," he said. He took the queen's hand, holding it tightly in his own. "You have nothing to fear. Our son will fail to prove the existence of magic, and I shall cast the false prince out--or into the dungeon. I have yet to decide."

"It's been some time since anyone was imprisoned down there," the queen mused.

"I'm still pondering whether to send our son there for a period. It may frighten the madness out of him."

"Darling, that would create a scandal and play havoc with the wedding plans. There are still many things to arrange, and we've already been set back by his accident."

"Hmph, I suppose you're right..." the king scowled. "We must handle this carefully. We cannot allow our son's madness to bring shame upon Perla. His self-centredness and childish tantrums are
bad enough without talk of magic, and of dragons in the cellar."

"Yet we haven't seen a tantrum for some time, and I hear his staff have become rather fond of him," the queen said. "His engagement has changed him. Prince Atsushi has been a good influence, and long may it continue."

The king glanced across at his staff, who were doing a good job of not listening. "That prince is a weak fool, but it works to our advantage. He needs this marriage. I won't have him marrying the Prince of Aurum after all this planning."

"Of course not, dear, we won't let that happen." The queen tilted her head, a thoughtful smile upon her lips. "Do you plan to indulge this notion of hunting dragons in the palace cellars?"

"Absolutely not."

"Do you not think it might help?"

"The only thing it will do is encourage our son's madness."

"I suspect it will cure it," the queen squeezed her husband's hand. "Indulge him, darling. He had a hard knock on the head when he fell from his horse. Once he sees there is no dragon, he will realise this is all madness, and go back to being the young man you know and love."

The king's eye twitched. "What makes you think I love our son?" he demanded quietly.

The queen leaned close and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "You still call him our son."

Kinshirou and Atsushi arrived at breakfast separately, and took their seats with some apprehension. Whilst dressing that morning, it had been hard to ignore the gossip of staff, and to learn that the king had awoken half the palace with his shouts of rage. The rumours said an intruder had been found in Prince Akoya's room. The rumours said he'd been imprisoned.

The rumours said the prince was mad.

It didn't take much discussion for the lovers to agree they'd appear at breakfast as though they'd spent the night apart, and Kinshirou had heavy-heartedly returned his ring to Atsushi. There was no telling whether the king approved of their engagement. They had to keep it quiet until they had fully assessed the situation, and made a decision on whether or not to depart for Aurum.

The king greeted them with a tight smile, and appeared no different to normal. But Kinshirou noticed the way his hand shook when he reached for his drink, and how his gaze flickered nervously to the door each time someone arrived.

When Akoya entered the room, the king paled.

"Good morning, your majesties," Akoya greeted his parents formally, bowing to them before taking his seat.

"Good morning, son," the king replied. "I trust you slept well."

"I did, thank you father. I hope you and mother slept well too." Akoya murmured thanks to the waiter who brought his food, and tucked into the meal, apparently oblivious to the fact his father was watching him.
Kinshirou glanced across at Atsushi, who adjusted his spectacles and gave a slight shrug: he wasn't sure what was going on, either.

"Yes. We slept perfectly well." The king's response was clipped, awkward.

"Good. I wouldn't want to hear of slamming doors or dreams of flying daggers keeping you from fitful sleep," Akoya smiled pleasantly at his father, who scowled at him.

"Son, you--"

"How about you, Kinshirou?" Akoya beamed across the table at his best friend. "Did you sleep well? And you, my dear Atsushi?"

Atsushi and Kinshirou exchanged glances again. Atsushi wasn't sure if Kinshirou could see it from the other side of the table, but from his seat beside Akoya, he could see the way his brow twitched, as though he was struggling not to frown.

"We both slept perfectly well--I believe?" Atsushi replied, tilting his head as he looked at Kinshirou. It wouldn't do to give away that they'd spent the night together, and he'd nearly slipped up.

Kinshirou nodded, unruffled by the near-mistake. "I slept comfortably," he agreed. Setting down his fork, he contemplated his friend. After being friends for years, it was easy to see that Akoya was furious. Kinshirou assumed Ibushi's absence had something to do with that.

"Is something on your mind, your highness?" he asked.

Concern flashed across Akoya's eyes as he effected a smile. "I'm worried that Prince Ibushi isn't at breakfast. He arrived so late last night, and is such a dear friend. I hope he slept well in his quarters and wasn't disturbed." He sighed, watching his father from the corner of his eye. "Perhaps I'll pay him a visit after breakfast--Is that alright, father?" Akoya treated the king to the full force of his smile then, and experienced a bitter sense of satisfaction that his father recoiled from his gaze.

"That trickst--" The king cleared his throat, cognizant of their audience. "I'm told his highness is extremely exhausted after his long journey," he replied levelly. "He is not to be disturbed until he's fit to join us."

"I see." Akoya looked away, and took a sip of his drink.

"What do you intend to do?" Atsushi asked, a little louder than he meant to. "Today, I mean," he added, his words somewhat belated as he hurried to recover his mistake. Two slip-ups in one morning. It certainly said something about his quality of sleep. "O-our wedding preparations are nearly finished, is what I meant," he rambled. "So I wondered if you have plans today, or if you are free, or, well..."

Whilst Kinshirou stared at Atsushi and mentally willed him to stop talking, Akoya let out a laugh.

"Oh Atsushi! You're so flustered this morning." He smiled, resting a hand over Atsushi's. It was an action that appeared both tender and possessive, but Kinshirou knew otherwise. This was all a play for the oblivious members of the court that sat around them.

"You do seem on edge," he agreed, a tiny smile upon his face as he looked at them. "Wedding nerves?"

"...Yes..." Atsushi nodded, studying his hands and toying with his engagement ring. "I think we're all nervous about the wedding."
"I'm sure it will be absolutely fine," the queen interjected. She had been quiet throughout breakfast, but now gave a winning smile as she gazed around the table. "Our plans are watertight."

"I'm too excited to be nervous," Akoya said, somewhat boastfully. "In answer to your question, Atsushi, I'm hoping to go on a little adventure with father today. Isn't that right, father?"

The king scowled. "Hm. Well, I do have a lot of other important matters to attend to..."

"Please, father?"

"What adventure do you two have planned, hm?" asked the queen, brows raising.

Akoya smiled at his mother. It was clear that his parents had talked. He could guess they thought he wouldn't bring up the cellars - or the dragon - in front of the others.

They were wrong.

"Mother, you really wouldn't approve," he laughed, the sound feeling hollow in his chest.

"Then perhaps you and your father oughtn't do it," the queen replied, smugness surfacing in her expression.

"But the cellars have always been out of bounds, and I'd love to explore them before I leave!" Akoya uttered his words as if it was nothing more than a frivolous, silly wish, with no purpose but to break the rules of his childhood.

Beside him, Atsushi let out a grunt of surprise, and Kinshirou raised his brows.

"The cellars?!" The queen was doing a very good job of playing along. "But they'll be so dirty. And dangerous!"

Over the past few minutes, conversation around the table had become muted, as everyone in the room subtly listened in.

Aware of this, Akoya sat up straighter. "The librarian tells me there's a dragon down there!" He laughed. "Those stories are only ever told to keep people away. Wouldn't it be fun to explore and find out what's really down there? I bet something marvellous is hidden away!"

A murmur rose up around the table as the other nobles began to discuss the possibilities.

"I hear that King Perla VI's hoard never was found," commented Duke Kurotori. "So many jewels fabled for their beauty..."

Earl Komi hummed. "That was such a long time ago, though. Who knows what it's like down there."

"All the more reason to find out!" Akoya beamed. "There isn't a person alive who has been down there. Wouldn't it be fun to explore?"

"I agree."

Akoya stare at his father in surprise. He'd expected a refusal, and an argument later, in private.

Yet his father had agreed.

"Really, father?"
"Really, darling?" the queen tilted her head, amusement in her eyes.

The king nodded and smiled, every inch the man in control. "Really. It is fanciful and ridiculous, but who am I to deny my own son his final wish as a free man?"

Kinshirou looked across at Atsushi. The king's statement was foreboding, no mere comment on marriage. Trouble was brewing--and their engagement could well be at risk.

"Oh father!" Akoya smiled brightly. "It will be so much fun!"

"I'm sure it will be." The king seemed to have recovered from earlier now. His gaze was stern and the colour had returned to his cheeks, and his shoulders were squared as he sipped his drink. "We shall enter the cellars directly after breakfast. We'll take a party of guards, in the event that we run into any difficulties."

Akoya understood this well enough: the guards were there to arrest him the moment he said or did something his father didn't like.

As breakfast continued, he prayed that his father's patience would last as far into the cellar as the room in which the dragon lay.

The palace had become quiet. There was little noise from the corridor, and only the faintest shuffling of feet or grumpy-sounding mutter confirmed the continuing presence of the guards outside.

Ibushi toyed with a loose thread on his tunic, and paced up and down. His stomach still growled and gurgled with hunger, on the verge of aching. He guessed he'd been forgotten--or left to starve. Akoya wouldn't want that, but how could he stop it happening if he wasn't allowed in?

So much for being free. Ibushi had enjoyed less than an hour of freedom from the mirror before being put in here.

Frowning, he stopped pacing and stared at the door. It had been locked last night, but technically he could get through it. He could incapacitate the guards, too.

The only thing stopping him was that it wouldn't work in his favour. Hurting people would give the king a reason to imprison him, maybe execute him. Ibushi knew little of the laws of modern Perla, but the Perla he'd learnt about as a child had harsh punishments for those who did wrong.

So he couldn't escape. He had behave well, no matter how maddening it was to be locked in this room without a chance to prove himself.

Ibushi huffed and ran his hands through his hair. The room was getting stuffy as the sun rose higher outside, and his clothing was far from suitable for the summer heat.

Going to the window, he fiddled with the catch, and took in a gulp of fresh air the moment it was open.

Elbows rested on the sill, he gazed out at the scenery. The palace grounds were beautiful, full of lush green lawns and bright, thriving flowerbeds. Beyond the carefully-pruned hedges were trees laden with fruit, and the sight of them made Ibushi's mouth water. If nobody brought him any food, maybe he could climb down the vines that grew up the wall, and steal some fruit. If he was quick, he could be back in this room before anyone noticed him gone.
Ibushi let out a sigh, and wished he had a dragon to summon.

Thinking of dragons made him think again of Akoya, and he wondered whether the king had agreed to go look upon the dragon. There was no doubt in Ibushi's mind that the dragon was there, because Akoya had said so. Ibushi's main curiosity was how the dragon had got there--and how long it had been stuck, before it died.

Though he didn't know the dragon, his heart ached for it. Dragons were brave and noble creatures, and any deaths were to be mourned.

Taking another deep breath of air, Ibushi rested his chin in his hand. He had to find a way out of this situation. He didn't intend to spend the rest of his days locked up, even if this place was far more picturesque than the mirror.

Ibushi was once again contemplating the vines outside when there were voices outside the door. At the sound of a key in the lock he turned, and after another quietly-spoken debate, Zundar walked in, carrying a tray that bore a plate with a domed lid, and a metal flagon and cup.

One of the guards closed the door behind him, and it locked again almost immediately.

"Good morning, your highness," Zundar set the tray on the table, and bowed. "Please accept my apologies in the delay of bringing your breakfast. The head chef was uncertain what best to serve you."

Ibushi nodded. "I'm sure whatever the head chef decided upon will be delicious," he replied, taking a seat at the table. He knew that the head chef was Zundar's brother, and knew the man's name was Dadacha. But he was yet to tell whether or not Zundar could be considered an ally, and uttering such personal details - details he couldn't logically know - could prove dangerous.

"I guarantee that it will," Zundar told him. With a flourish, he lifted the dome from the plate to reveal a paltry dish of cold, sliced meats and bread. An aroma of orange and spices rose up from the plate, and though the food was hardly enough to be considered a meal, Ibushi was hungry enough that he'd eat anything.

Lifting his head, he smiled gratefully at the aide. "It smells wonderful, thank you."

"It tastes even better," Zundar promised. Holding a finger to his lips, he drew a cloth-wrapped package from his pocket, and set it beside the plate. "One of the chef's specialities, and a favourite of his highness," he stated.

"I see..." Ibushi studied the package, then looked at Zundar questioningly. "I'm sure it will be very nice."

"Prince Akoya would certainly be happy if you tried his favourite food," Zundar stated.

Ibushi unfolded the cloth, brows rising when he saw the delicacies inside. They were rounded, coloured in pastel shades of pink and green. Macarons, Ibushi remembered. Argent didn't have such a sweet treat, but he'd seen Akoya eating them in his room, and remembered that Dadacha cooked them daily.

"Then I must please his highness by giving this a try," Ibushi said, having the impression that the macarons had been smuggled in on Akoya's request. Which suggested Zundar was an ally.

"You certainly must," Zundar bowed and took a step back. "I shall return later to collect your tray. Please enjoy your meal."
Bowing again, he went to the door and knocked upon it. A moment later, he was gone, the guards outside still grumbling about his arrival.

Ibushi studied the food set out before him and gave it an experimental snuff. The king wouldn't try to poison him, would he?

He would only find out the answer by eating it.

But first, he'd try the macarons. Akoya had spoken so highly of them. It was only right that Ibushi's first meal in a century was his love's favourite food.

The air in the library felt heavy, and thick with expectation. Akoya knew the guards had been gossiping about him--had been laughing at him. Their eyes glimmered with amusement, their mouths were firm lines that twitched mirthfully at the corners. Yet their amusement was cruel, like knives in the darkness rather than the stars that Akoya saw in Ibushi's eyes. Ibushi had often gazed at him in amusement, but his eyes had always revealed warmth and fondness, and he'd never hidden a smile.

These guards were insincere, and Akoya knew they disliked him. This trip into the cellars was no more than a game to them. It was a game that would be dirty, but meant a break from routine, into an otherwise forbidden part of the castle.

Akoya was impatient to get into the cellars, but his father had sent for lanterns to be brought, and was not yet present himself.

So Akoya waited, together with the two guards who had followed his every move since he left his room that morning. After a time he began to pace, his footsteps piercing the uncomfortable silence that pervaded the library. The guards watched him, their eyes distrustful, their mouths slack as if ready to say something.

Akoya toyed with a strand of hair, and wished he'd braided it this morning. A braid was more suitable for venturing into the cellars, and it didn't become untidy if he played with it, and Ibushi liked it like that.

Not that he'd been able to see Ibushi yet...

Akoya frowned. He couldn't get distracted. He'd be able to see Ibushi once he'd proven magic to his father.

What was taking his father so long, anyway? Surely it didn't take long to round up few lanterns and guards? The king should be able to summon those things in moments, at a mere snap of his fingers!

Sighing, Akoya came to a stop by the door.

If he went in there now, the guards would either have to try to stop him, or follow him. The guards would see the dragon, and his father wouldn't question the words of his most loyal servants, would he?

Fortunately he was saved from having to tear open the door and race off into the darkness. A herd of booted footsteps heralded the king's arrival, and Akoya raised his brows in surprise when he took in his father's appearance.

"Well then?" said the king, resting his hands on his hips. His worn breeches were almost threadbare at the knees, and his shirt was so old it had long since ceased to be white. Only his boots were of the
sort Akoya was accustomed to seeing his father wear: black leather, softened with use, yet in excellent condition. He had no idea where the king had sourced the rest of the clothes.

"Old clothes for dirty work, my son," the king pointed out, smirking. "I'm surprised you didn't think of it yourself."

Akoya looked down at his own clothes, knowing that the pale, soft fabrics were going to be streaked with muck by the time they completed their task. But he'd done it before, and the laundress had done an excellent job of removing the stains.

"I considered it important not to keep your majesty waiting," Akoya replied, irritated at being kept waiting himself. "Therefore I came here immediately."

"How good of you," the king replied, sarcasm in his tone. "Now let's get on with it. Since you are so certain of what we'll find, I'll allow you to guide us on our way--you two!" he signalled to two guards, holding a lantern each. "Lead the way. Follow the directions of his highness."

The door groaned as it was opened, the darkness beyond like a yawning mouth and the air stale and unpleasant.

Pausing at the top of the stairs, the guards looked to Akoya, suddenly less eager to proceed.

Akoya smiled pleasantly at them. "Down the stairs and straight ahead if you please, gentlemen."

"Go on then!" urged the king, voice rising amidst the books.

"Yes your majesty," replied the senior guard. Gulping, he began down the stairs, holding up the lantern to illuminate the path.

Akoya glanced over his shoulder at his father, and then followed. The cellar wasn't scary anymore, but his heart still pounded as he descended the stairs. What if the dragon wasn't there? What if he really had imagined it--if it had been his mind playing tricks on him, thanks to the librarian's joke of a dragon living down there?

Pursing his lips, Akoya fixed his gaze upon the darkness beyond the lantern-light, and listened to the clumping footsteps of his father and the guards following behind.

This was it. This was his chance to prove the existence of magic--and maybe to prove himself, too.

For Ibushi's sake, he hoped he wouldn't fail.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Akoya guides his father to find a dragon, whilst Kinshirou and Atsushi visit a priest. Neither errand goes as expected.

Chapter Notes

Have almost finished writing chapter six, so figured I might as well post chapter 4 now!

"We should go to the priest."

Kinshirou had decided that during breakfast, but he only spoke up about it now, in his room, away from any staff or eavesdropping nobles.

"Now?" Atsushi stared at him. "What about the king?"

"His Majesty has gone into the cellars with Akoya, on a mad errand to find a dragon," Kinshirou rolled his eyes. "We should go to the priest now, and get the ceremony over with."

Atsushi peered worriedly over the top of his spectacles. "But the usual traditions say--"

"Atchan," Kinshirou pressed a finger to Atsushi's lips. "This is our only chance. As members of the court, we need only the blessing of Perla's royal family, and Akoya gave it."

Atsushi kissed Kinshirou's fingertip and took his hand, entwining their fingers. "Lovers don't normally see each other before the wedding ceremony," he said softly. "It's a nice tradition... But you're right."

"I'm right, and I cannot wait any longer," Kinshirou stepped in closer, lowering his voice. "I want to call you my husband, Atsushi."

Atsushi closed the space between them, pulse racing as he brought their lips together. Kinshirou's mouth was warm and inviting, his kiss sweet and firm. All Atsushi's anxiety melted away in the wake of Kinshirou's lips, his hands, his essence.

When they parted, Atsushi treated his fiancé to a bright smile.

"Let's go and get married, Kinchan."

A pretty blush filled Kinshirou's cheeks, and he nodded, heart quivering. He wouldn't admit to the knot of uncertainty that grew tighter in his stomach with every passing second. He wouldn't admit that he doubted whether they could marry without the king's approval, regardless of gaining Akoya's blessing.

Which made the need to go to the priest all the more urgent. Last night the man had been surprised,
yet agreeable. Kinshirou hoped it was still so.

Kissing Atsushi's cheek, he nodded and led him to the door.

The passageway wasn't as disgusting as Akoya had thought. By candlelight, he'd scarcely been able to see two feet in front of himself, and had only really felt the dirt and grime. He'd pictured filthy black walls and thick-spun cobwebs, but most of the dirt upon the walls looked like a mixture of dust and black marks from the torches of centuries past. Most of the cobwebs, he supposed, had been brushed away when he'd walked into them on his first journey down here.

"This place is utterly filthy!" grumbled the king. "I'll have the cleaners come down here from now on. Not an inch of my palace shall go without cleaning."

"A good idea, father," Akoya called back. He grinned to himself. No cleaner would want to come within a hundred paces of the cellars, if they saw what was down here.

Assuming he hadn't hallucinated it. The air was pretty thin after all. Maybe he'd fallen into a lucid dream when he was last here.

But the memory of the dragon felt too real. Akoya remembered the horror and the fear, remembered the uncertainty, and the eventual tentative calm when he realised the creature was dead.

It was real, and it was down here. His father couldn't deny magic when a magical creature was crouched right there before him.

"This all seems a waste of time to me," one of the lead guards muttered quietly.

"Hush your mouth, boy," replied the other. "Not like you've got anything better to do."

"There's not really any dragon down here," the first grumbled. "It's all made up. It's got to be. Dragons don't exist."

"Are you scared?" the older guard teased. "You're scared, aren't you? Are you a baby? If there was a dragon, we'd know about it."

"Of course there is no dragon!"

Akoya jumped a little at his father's booming voice. He hadn't realised how close he was.

"You will see, men, that our cellars are empty of all but rats and dirt," the king snorted. "Then we can finally--"

Metal clattered across the ground just ahead, and the guard gave a high-pitched shout of surprise.

"What's that, man?!" demanded the king.

The guard cleared his throat. "I kicked something, your majesty."

"Kicked something? What on earth is there to kick down here?!"

"A candlestick, your majesty." Another guard had stopped to take a look, and picked the offending object up.

"That's probably the one I left down here last time," Akoya said. "I swapped it for the torch from the
sconce." He pointed out the empty sconce, easily visible in the light thrown out from the lanterns.

"Hmph. Don't leave things where people can trip on them," the king reprimanded.

"Of course not, father. Sorry."

Crossing his arms, the king scowled at the guards in the lead. "Well? What are you waiting for? Keep going!"

The group proceeded along the corridor, darkness stretching out before them beyond walls that were blacker than ever. Suddenly the dark space ahead seemed to become darker than before, the air chilly and foreboding.

Akoya's heart clenched in trepidation.

They were nearly there.

A few more paces, and they'd be in the dragon room.

His father couldn't deny magic once he laid eyes on it.

The priest's rooms were in the opposite wing to Kinshirou's, and getting there meant passing through the main courtyard. As usual, the area was bustling with nobles and staff alike, all going about their daily business—or in the case of the nobles, taking in the bright summer sunshine.

Kinshirou instinctively let go of Atsushi's hand as they stepped into the courtyard, the hair rising on the back of his neck. Squinting in the light, he cast a glance about and saw that they were being watched.

"Kinchan?" Atsushi murmured quietly.

"It's nothing," Kinshirou replied. Sliding a hand into his pocket, he felt Akoya's seal there, and forced himself to focus on its weight, the sharp, patterned edges of his insignia carved into the metal base, and the smoothness of the wood at the top. This was the symbol of their friend's blessing. This was their means to gaining their marriage.

"Are you sure?" Atsushi pushed his spectacles further up his nose as he hurried after Kinshirou, who had set off on a hurried pace across the courtyard.

"I'm sure." Kinshirou glanced left and right as he walked. The others had stopped looking at them now. He felt stupid for being so paranoid. Nobody cared that he was walking there with Atsushi, and they weren't doing anything wrong. The only reason anyone had looked at them was through natural curiosity: they had looked to see who had arrived.

"Are they watching us?" Atsushi's voice dropped to a whisper as they reached the door on the other side of the courtyard.

"Not anymore."

Kinshirou pulled the door open, and waved Atsushi through.

Atsushi stepped gladly into the cool air of the corridor beyond, relieved to be out of the sun. He felt entirely too warm out in the open, and wasn't sure it was completely to do with the weather. He'd felt warm ever since this morning, as if on the verge of blushing. He was on the verge of blushing, and
was trying his best not to catch Kinshirou's eye, in case his cheeks flushed red and his smile betrayed his heart, or he spoke too unthinkingly in the presence of those who didn't know about their relationship.

Only when they were married could he stop worrying about this. Only when they were married could they be open about the love that bloomed between them.

And it would be a happy marriage, one based on romantic love and unavering friendship. Whether they chose to make their home in Epinard or Aurum, or even here in Perla, he and Kinshirou could live proudly and contentedly side by side.

Epinard...

Atsushi hadn't thought of the safety of his kingdom in all of this. He was too excited to marry Kinshirou to think of why he needed to get married in the first place.

But it was no longer a need to marry. Atsushi wanted to marry—wanted to marry Kinshirou.

Seeing that the corridor leading to the priest's rooms was empty, Atsushi smiled and caught Kinshirou's hand. "Let's have a quick ceremony," he said softly.

Kinshirou glanced at him. "I thought you were concerned about tradition?" he asked, a small, fond smile playing across his lips as he squeezed Atsushi's hand.

"I'm more concerned about seeing this through."

"So let's see this through..."

They came to a halt at the priest's door, gripping each other's hand even tighter as they took a collective deep breath.

"...Ready?" Kinshirou smiled.

Atsushi smiled back, nodding. "Ready."

Together, they knocked on the door.

"You will soon see that the cellars are empty," the king announced as the group neared the end of the passage. "Which is why I brought you all down here. You can confirm the emptiness of these abandoned rooms, and then we can finally be done with these dragon rumours. My grandmother tried to put a stop to such ridiculous stories, and failed. I shall not. My own son has been taken in by them, and as such has led us to be here, into this filthy cellar, looking for something we shall not find. There is no dragon in these cellars. Dragons do not exist, and never have done!"

Akoya squared his shoulders as the king continued to rant behind him, prepared for what was to come.

The leading guards passed through the doorway, their lanterns glinting off the stone lintel.

Then one of them let out a scream and dropped his lantern, and Akoya smiled as the flames died inside.

He hadn't imagined it.
Together, the guards stumbled backwards, tripping over each other as they raced to get back along the corridor.

"What's the meaning of this?!" demanded the king, blocking the corridor as they tore past Akoya. "Fairy stories got the better of you?"

"D-d-d...!" exclaimed one guard.

The other was pale in the light, shaking his head, his eyes wide.

Akoya stepped forward and relieved him of the lantern. "You saw my dragon, I expect," he said dryly. "Father, would you like to see?"

The king eyed him. "You put them up to this!" he hissed. He gave the nearest guard a firm slap on the shoulder, eliciting a high-pitched shriek of surprise. "Quit playing around, men. You aren't here to play games."

"Y-your majesty..."

Akoya rolled his eyes. "It isn't scary," he said. Raising the lantern to light the way, he walked boldly into the room.

The sight of the dragon didn't shock him this time, but it still took his breath away. Dead though it was, the creature looked noble and grand where it crouched on the floor. The muted iridescent green of its scales spoke of a past splendour, and though its milky eyes saw no more, their gaze appeared intelligent and knowing.

Akoya almost wished it was alive. It would have been beautiful in its time--but deadly, too, he realised, suddenly aware of why the walls of the corridor were really so black.

"On my mother's grave!" the king drew to a stop beside him, staring up at the dragon's huge jaws. "Son, I don't know how you pulled this off, but even for a trick, this is impressive."

Akoya's heart sank. Even a real dragon couldn't convince his father!

"Father, it's real..." he said, voice quiet. "Dead, but it lived once. Examine it as closely as you like, you'll find no tricks."

"Blimey, it's true!" came an exclamation behind them. The other guards had filed into the room, and mumbled to each other in surprise.

Akoya didn't fail to notice that the guards kept their distance. He'd done the same, when he first set eyes on the creature.

He felt a cold triumph in their surprise, their fear. They'd disbelieved him, mocked him, disrespected him. They could do that no longer.

This was a chance to finally gain some respect from them.

Strolling forward, he rested against one of the dragon's front legs, and ran a hand over the dusty scales. A rat scuttled out from between its paws - just as it had when he'd last been here - but he didn't flinch. He'd expected the rat. The others hadn't, and the sudden movement caused a few shouts of surprise from amongst the guards.

"See?" he called out to them. "It's solid. As real as anything."
An apprehensive frown appeared on the king's face. "Give me one of those lanterns!" he snapped, snatching one from the nearest guard. Then he stepped forward, and began a slow inspection of the dragon.

Akoya watched in silence as he studied the claws, the scales and the great dusty flanks. The king clambered over the dragon's tail and disappeared into the darkness on the other side of the creature's form, his footsteps echoing away, and then louder, louder still.

When he appeared at the front paws again, having completed a circuit of the creature, his face was pale.

"What do you think of my dragon, father?" Akoya asked softly. Though his father had been cold and cruel to him in the past months, he almost pitied him now. All his father's beliefs in the non-existence of magic had been obliterated within a day.

His father, the king of Perla, was afraid.

The king took a step closer, and Akoya saw then that he was trembling. "I think you ought to show me to those scrolls you found," he replied. "Perla must utilise all knowledge she has, be it scientific or otherwise."

Akoya beamed, hopes rising. "This way, father."

He showed his father through the tunnel. He showed him the caved in ceiling that blocked further progress, showed him back along the tunnel to the concealed store room with its carefully catalogued scrolls.

The dragon had given the king a shock, but on sight of the scrolls he soon recovered. Scrolls - even magic ones - were something he knew what to do with. All at once the king began shouting orders to the guards: the scrolls were to be brought into the library, for proper cataloguing, and the careful consideration of the palace scientists and academics. The blockage in the tunnel was to be removed, the ceiling repaired--the tunnel explored further.

"If these rooms hold unknown power," said the king to his men, as he prepared to leave. "I intend for all of Perla to be able to use it."

Heart bursting with hope, Akoya grabbed an armful of scrolls from the occult section, and followed his father out of the cellar. There was no telling what other secrets these scrolls held, and his father could no longer deny the existence of magic.

The palace priest, Wombat, had a kindly face, and what he lacked in height he made up for in rotundity. He was well-liked, and had a lot to say about love and goodness and selflessness. Kinshirou didn't always agree with what Wombat said, but he respected him for his unwavering beliefs in his philosophies.

That respect, however, was dwindling.

"I'm sorry," Priest Wombat said as he strode up and down the room. "I can't perform the ceremony I agreed to last night."

"But why?" Atsushi stared at him, lips a grim line. "You were happy about it! You said you thought us a better match than Akoya and I!"
Wombat stopped pacing, and looked at him. "I still do, young prince."

"But...why..." Atsushi's voice wobbled.

Kinshirou squeezed his hand, silently willing him to retain his composure. "We have the blessing of his highness, so why do you refuse us?"

"I have been forbidden by a greater power," Wombat replied, his tone gentle.

Kinshirou took a step forward. Despite being the shortest of his friends, he towered over Wombat easily, and fixed him with a demanding glare. "Did you not say yourself that Love is the greatest power on earth?"

Wombat met his gaze, unruffled by the intensity he found there. "Love is what moves all people, whether for reasons just or unjust."

Atsushi averted his gaze, frowning. He'd known Wombat only briefly, but could tell the man was gearing up to begin one of his philosophical lectures.

"It is love that has brought you to my chamber, likewise it is love that prevents me from carrying out your desires," the priest paced the floor, though on his rounded frame it looked more like a casual stroll back and forth. "Although I cannot stand in the way of love so pure and true as your own--"

"So don't!" Kinshirou snapped. Letting go of Atsushi's hand, he grabbed Wombat's shoulders and stared at him. "It's hypocritical to preach on love when you're standing in the way of what you deem greater than anything!"

Wombat's expression filled with regret. "Your highnesses should seek other options," he said. "The king forbids your betrothal, and his word holds more power than that of a man who has given up his right to the throne."

Kinshirou froze, and behind him Atsushi let out a surprised gasp.

"...What?" He pulled off his spectacles, blinking at Wombat as if having blurred vision would make the facts clearer.

Withdrawing his hands from the priest's shoulders, Kinshirou took a step back, a frown on his face that was no longer confused, but furious. "What on earth has that idiot done now?!" he demanded.

"As far as his majesty has told me, the former prince Akoya has given his right to the throne in favour of Prince Ryuu of Vesta," Wombat shook his head, expression clouding. "His majesty is deciding whether to accept or reject this, though considering their relationship of late, a happy outcome is uncertain."

"Why would Akoya do something so stupid?"

"He must have a reason for it..." Atsushi's hand found Kinshirou's again, and they shared a worried glance.

Wombat raised his brows. "A foreign interloper, I'm told. The king is keeping an eye on him."

"Prince Ibushi," Atsushi said, Kinshirou's hiss of breath making him realise he'd spoken without thinking again. He cleared his throat. "I mean. His highness' consort."

Apparently that had been a bad thing to say too, because Atsushi found Kinshirou glaring at him
from the corner of his eye.

"Look," he said. "Priest Wombat, please. We came here for a wedding ceremony. Whether Akoya is still a prince or not, he was a prince when he gave us his blessing. We could have..." he trailed off as he remembered the previous visit to the priest. It felt like a lifetime ago, but it was only last night. Last night, which had turned out to be so long...

Atsushi gulped, a sick feeling in his stomach. "I'm sorry, Kinchan," he uttered, eyes stinging. "If I'd not been so stuck on tradition, we could have been wed last night, and this wouldn't be happening."

Kinshirou took one look at Atsushi's devastated gaze and took him into his arms. It didn't matter that the priest was there. What mattered was that Atsushi was hurting, was blaming himself for something neither of them could have foreseen.

"We'll find another way," he promised, voice hard with determination. Atsushi felt tense, and didn't calm despite his words. Sighing, Kinshirou rubbed his back. "We can go to Aurum. We can leave immediately."

"But Akoya--"

"Wanted us wed within two days," Kinshirou reached up to wipe the tears from Atsushi's eyes. "We may be able to make it to Aurum in time. If not, we can still be wed when we arrive. His deadline is meaningless. We just have to marry before your sister does."

Atsushi gave a bitter smile, chest aching. "You're right, but that isn't what I was trying to say."

"Then what?" Kinshirou beheld him with confusion, heart sinking. Atsushi looked regretful, as if he was about to say or do something he knew was stupid. "Atchan...?"

"We can't leave Perla," Atsushi bowed his head, a lump rising in the back of his throat. "We can't abandon Akoya. He's our friend. What if the king decides to...to..." He couldn't finish his sentence. The thought of the king casting his own son out of the kingdom was too terrible to bear.

"So we take him with us," Kinshirou shrugged and pulled Atsushi into another embrace. "The way things are here, he may be glad to leave for a while."

Atsushi pressed his face against Kinshirou's shoulder, shaking his head. "He won't leave Ibushi behind."

"So we take Ibushi with us too." Kinshirou scowled. Atsushi wasn't thinking clearly today. He was too anxious.

Wombat cleared his throat. "Sadly that won't be possible," he said. "The foreigner is under arrest until the king decides what to do with him."

The priest spoke gently, but his words felt like a hard punch to the gut.

Atsushi let out a shaky breath and pulled away from Kinshirou. "Then the king is holding us all to ransom," he muttered, his teary-eyed gaze turning pleading. "We promised to help Ibushi."

"We don't owe him anything," Kinshirou pointed out, frowning. Seeing the way Atsushi flinched, he sighed. "...but we owe Akoya," he conceded, with a reluctant nod. "He told us we should be wed."

A weak smile formed on Atsushi's face, despite the tears that threatened to fall. "He bullied us into admitting what we wanted. We need to help him, Kinchan."
"We need to get married. It's what he wanted. If we do that, we're in a stronger position to help him," Kinshirou said, thoughts racing. "Nobody will be able to push for your marriage to Akoya anymore. United, we represent two powerful kingdoms. We can provide sanctuary for our friend and his--"

Kinshirou sighed. There was no point denying the fact when Atsushi had already let it slip. "And his consort. Four princes surely have more combined power than one king..." He looked at Wombat expectantly.

"I'm sorry," Wombat shook his head. "My answer is still no."

"Please!"

"I can't. Your love must find another way."

"But--" Kinshirou broke off, letting out a growl of frustration. "Forget it. Come on Atchan. We're wasting our time."

Atsushi let Kinshirou drag him towards the door, almost colliding with him when he turned around again.

"Know this, priest," Kinshirou uttered venomously, eyes flashing with fury as he pointed an accusing finger at Wombat. "Your denial stands in the way of real love, that of people more than worthy of it. You have no right to speak of love when you place the cruelty of a king over all else."

Turning on his heel, Kinshirou led Atsushi away, glad of the way Atsushi slammed the priest's door on the way out. His chest felt tight, and his head hurt. Kinshirou knew that his words could be considered an act of treason against the king, but he didn't care. He only cared that his greatest wish was being denied, all because of a situation the king had caused.

"Kinchan..." Atsushi murmured as they hurried along the corridor.

"Please, don't," Kinshirou stopped walking, squeezing his eyes shut tightly. His eyes stung, his spirit was wounded, and his heart ached, but he couldn't cry here. It was unbefitting to a prince to show his emotions so strongly in public.

Atsushi gulped. "...I'm sorry."

They continued their journey through the palace in silence, and when they reached his rooms, Kinshirou went inside alone.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A hope, a revelation, a plan: Whilst the palace academics examine the newfound scrolls, Akoya has business with his father--and Atsushi and Kinshirou have business with each other. As the priest is called to do his work, the king makes a request of Ibushi. But as each problem is smoothed out, another arises...

Chapter Notes

It feels like an age since I updated this! I no longer have a two-chapter barrier between what's posted and what's written, and am writing other things too (my WIP list is ridiculous) so updates might get a little slower. But updates absolutely will continue. This is a ship I'll go down with, and I'm far too invested in writing this to give up now!

Due to the rediscovery of the scrolls in the cellars, the library had become a hive of activity. The librarian had taken charge of the situation, and was directing bundles of scrolls to different areas of the library, shouting out orders to his assistants, and grumbling about heavy-handed academics.

The writings relating to magic were mostly being ignored in favour of parchments with more obvious historical or scientific merit. The most learned scholars of the palace had caught wind of the discovery fairly fast, and had flocked to the library. They now stood around the tables and argued amongst themselves on the relevance of this new discovery and that, and debated what to do with the new knowledge.

Akoya watched as another bundle of scrolls was added to the 'occult' table-- the very table where he'd learnt his first spell. He itched to sit down and study them. It would be so easy to lose himself in all this new knowledge, and forget everything that was troubling him. He could learn more spells, more magic. Magic his father couldn't deny.

But his troubles were a million times more important than learning more magic. He had to make sure Kinshirou and Atsushi were wed - by the end of the day, before the idiots could talk themselves out of it! - and he had to free Ibushi.

Casting a lingering glance at the scrolls, Akoya left the library, a feeling of wistfulness in his heart. It wasn't long ago that he'd found out how to free Ibushi the first time. Now Ibushi has held not by magic, but a belligerent king, and freeing him wasn't nearly as straightforward. He'd have to use all his knowledge and power of persuasion to convince his father that Ibushi was an ally.

Now the king had seen the dragon, Akoya hoped he'd be more open minded about Ibushi's identity--his real identity.

It was time to tell his father the truth. That was his best hope of getting the outcome he wanted, and after the shock of seeing the dragon, perhaps the king's mind would be more easily swayed.
Brushing a speck of dust from his sleeve, Akoya set off through the palace. He'd seek out his father soon enough. But first, he needed a map.

After parting from Kinshirou, Atsushi had wandered the palace without aim, seeking a quiet place where he could contemplate the morning without interruption.

Kinshirou had been upset, and understandably so. Atsushi hadn't expected him to shut him out of his rooms.

It made him wonder if he was being too stubborn, too inflexible, and now he doubted himself. Though he felt duty-bound to help Ibushi, and bound by friendship and gratitude to help Akoya, was it too extreme to refuse to leave the country for the sake of marriage to the one he loved? A union with Kinshirou was the stuff of his dreams, so why had he been so quick to submit to the king's wishes? Why did he have to lose hope so early, when they could surely think of a million different ways to get married--and during the next few days, too!

Atsushi let out a heavy sigh, footsteps slowing. It was quieter here, an area mainly made up of what looked like store-rooms and vacant lodgings for the staff of guests.

Good. This was the perfect place to be alone. Nobody would think to look for him up here.

Fighting to contain the tremors in his shoulders, Atsushi quietly opened the nearest door, and peeped inside.

It was empty, a store room like several others he'd passed, with a desk and a chair surrounded by boxes. Atsushi glanced along the corridor to make sure nobody had seen him, and stepped inside.

Tears began to fall from his eyes the moment the door closed behind him. Atsushi slumped down at the desk, and muffled his sobs behind his hands.

They couldn't get married.

Kinshirou was so upset. Worse than that, he was heartbroken.

And it was all his fault.

Atsushi sniffled, pushing off his spectacles and swiping at his tears with the heels of his hands. He had to make this right. He just didn't know how.

How did you get married, if you were tied to one place and the king of that place had forbidden it?

Last night had been so full of hope. By morning, all hope had been dashed.

Atsushi raked a hand through his hair. He supposed he should have known better than to believe everything would go to plan. Nothing seemed to go to plan these day. Even his arranged marriage hadn't turned out as it was meant to!

Did the king still expect him to marry Akoya?

Atsushi shuddered.

He couldn't marry Akoya. They were friends, but not lovers. Kinshirou was the only one he wanted to be with.
Kinshirou wanted to be with him, too. Wanted to marry him.

...Kinshirou was hurting...

It was all his fault.

Fresh tears escaped Atsushi's eyes, and he buried his face in his hands, shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

A few minutes later, Akoya threw the door open and marched inside. He stopped in his tracks when he saw who was slumped at the desk.

"Atsushi?" He frowned. Why was Atsushi here? Why was Atsushi crying? Those didn't look like happy tears. Why wasn't he happy?!

"Akoya?!" Atsushi blinked rapidly, rubbing away his tears. "I-I'm sorry, I...I've got to go."

He jumped up from the chair and strode towards the door, only to find it quietly shut before he could reach it.

"What's wrong?" Akoya spoke softly, leaning against the door so Atsushi couldn't pass him.

"N...Nothing..."

"Atsushi, you're crying in a dusty old map room. Something is wrong--Is Kinshirou being an idiot?"

Atsushi stared at Akoya, vision blurred by tears and lack of spectacles. "No," he said, gulping to try and clear the lump in his throat. "No..." He turned away, seeking out his spectacles from where he'd discarded them on the desk. "I'm the idiot," he admitted softly.

Akoya's heart sank. For Atsushi to call himself an idiot meant that something had gone badly wrong between him and Kinshirou. He dreaded to think what that was.

But he needed to know, because seeing Atsushi crying hurt, and doubtless Kinshirou was crying too, as alone as Atsushi had been, and that hurt too.

Akoya had not formed his plans and been prepared to sacrifice his freedom just for Atsushi and Kinshirou to be sad and apart. They had to be wed. They loved each other--they were made for each other!

With quiet footsteps and some uncertainty, he stepped up to Atsushi and placed a hand on his shoulder. "What did you do?"

"I...I broke h-his heart!" Atsushi's words were distorted by a sob, his voice squeaking awkwardly as he tried to force out an explanation. "Priest Wombat said His Majesty--Kinchan wanted to go to Aurum. B-but we--Prince Ibushi...Kinchan and I p-promised..."

Tightening his grip in Atsushi's shoulder, Akoya narrowed his eyes as he tried to understand. What did that old Wombat and his father have to do with--oh.

"Did my father forbid your marriage to Kinshirou?"

"Yes..."

"And Kinshirou wanted to go to Aurum, because you can wed there without interference?"
"Yes, but--"

"But you're an idiot," Akoya sighed. "You promised to help Ibushi. But I'm here. Though my father is being difficult, I won't let anything happen to Ibushi."

"I... What if he--what if you're in trouble too?"

Atsushi sounded so pitiful that Akoya didn't think twice at pulling him into a hug. He'd so seldom been afforded such comforts himself, yet had so often needed them. Right now, Atsushi needed comfort.

Even if he was a complete idiot.

"I won't let that become a problem," he said, trying to sound confident despite his uncertainty. "I have plans, and father won't be able to deny me."

"But what if he does?"

"He won't." Akoya pulled back, hands coming to rest on Atsushi's shoulders. "Listen to me. You and Kinshirou have to get married," he said, thoughts racing as he sought an alternative plan. "I have to speak to my father about something, but I want you to go to my rooms and wait for me. Have Zundar bring you some tea and macarons if you want."

Atsushi finally put on his spectacles, and peered at him with curious, tear-sore eyes. "Is there something you want me to do?" he asked.

Akoya shook his head. "Just wait there for me. Can you do that?"

Biting his lip, Atsushi nodded. "I'm sorry for being a burden."

"You're not. You're just an idiot." Akoya walked across the room, checking through a pile of old maps and selecting one. "Calm down and wait in my rooms. I'll join you as soon as possible."

"Alright. Thank you."

"Thank me once this is all over and done with."

Akoya strode from the room, his expression so serious that Atsushi worried about what he intended to do.

The king was relaxing with a cup of wine in his private parlour when his aide informed him that Akoya wished to speak with him.

After the magic and the dragon - a real dragon! - the king dreaded what else his strange son was going to spring on him. He gulped down the rest of his wine and signalled for more.

"Send him away," he said, as a servant hurriedly refilled his cup. "I'm busy."

Hesitance flickered across the aide's face, and the king scowled.

"Do you have a problem with following orders?"

"Not at all, your Majesty. It's just that his highness is rather insistent."
Rolling his eyes, the king swigged from his newly-replenished wine. "That boy has always been insistent." He studied his wine, his own reflection glaring back at him. It was like seeing an older version of his son, proud and determined.

Lifting his gaze, the king found that his aide was going to the door. "Let him come in," he called out. "And bring me more wine."

As the servant scurried off to fetch a fresh flagon, the king finished the wine he had left, and steeled himself for whatever Akoya intended to bother him about this time.

No longer could he deny his son's words as fanciful or delusional. After the display of magic, and coming face to face with what was undeniably the corpse of a dragon, he had to accept magic as fact. He wanted so strongly to deny it and pretend there was no dragon in the cellar. Yet his men had seen it, too. Ordering them to deny it would be a poor choice—he would lose their respect. A king's men remained loyal so long as he maintained their respect. That had been drummed into him since birth, and he'd subsequently drummed it into Akoya too.

The door opened, interrupting the king's thoughts, and with a quiet thanks to the aide, Akoya stepped into the room.

"Father? I want to speak to you."

The king reached for his wine, pleased to find his servant had silently returned with more whilst he was lost in thought.

Taking a sip, he eyed Akoya levelly. "Go on," he said.

Akoya took a deep breath, a rolled-up map in his hands. He focused on the feeling of the old parchment against his skin, conscious of not crushing it by gripping too tightly in anxiety.

"Now that you've acknowledged my magic and my dragon, I want to show you something else the world no longer believes in."

"I doubt I want to see," the king sighed. "But you're stubborn, and I have things to attend to, so hurry up and show me."

Eager, Akoya walked forward and opened the map. "This map is over a hundred years old."

The king looked blankly at the map, then at him. "What of it?"

"Do you notice something different, compared to a modern map?"

"I know some names and borders have changed," the king shrugged. "Cerulean and Scarlet are part of Epinard, for instance. I'm sure you'll visit the regions when you live there."

Fury burst forth in Akoya's chest. He swallowed, fighting it back. Now was not the time for arguing about the arranged marriage. He had to save arguments for when he could speak calmly.

"I have no intention of living in Epinard, but this is related to the kingdom." Forcing himself to smile, Akoya set the map on the table beside the king, using the wine flagon and cup to weight down the edges.

"Look at the border between there and here."

"It's mountainous and impassable, everybody knows that..." The king cast a glance over their region
of the map, and frowned. Was it the wine, or was the mountain range much larger than on the maps they used today?

"Why, these idiot cartographers may as well have invented an entire kingdom there!" he exclaimed.

"That's because there is a kingdom there," Akoya replied.

The king grabbed up the flagon and placed a hand on the map to stop it rolling up whilst he refilled his cup. Some of the wine splashed out onto the map, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Are there any other flights of fancy you'd like to tell me today, son?"

"It isn't a flight of fancy. It's hidden by a magical curse that was placed upon it a hundred years ago."

"So why does nobody remember it being there?"

"That's the nature of the curse. A witch and a demon combined powers to lock the kingdom away, and wipe it from living memory." Akoya wrinkled his nose. "All because a previous king did something they didn't like."

"Kings have to make decisions wisely," the king stated, nodding agreeably with himself. "But I see no reason why I should believe it."

"This kingdom disappeared a hundred years ago," Akoya reminded him.

"So you say. I need more evidence, son."

Akoya sighed. There was always a demand for evidence, for proof.

"Father, when did people stop believing in dragons? How long were those cellars off-limits?"

The king's brow wrinkled as he thought on this. "It was my own grandmother who forbade people from entering, I believe. After the ceiling collapse. It must have been around..." he trailed off, muttering to himself as his brow settled into what was becoming a habitual scowl.

"A hundred years ago?" Akoya spoke quietly, crouching down beside his father's chair. "And people stopped believing in magic soon after."

"...yes. Science disproved--"

"The knowledge was lost in the cellars, where none could get to it, so there was nothing to believe besides science," Akoya interrupted.

"I'll give you that," the king huffed. "Next you'll be telling me this mysterious cursed kingdom is the mythical lost kingdom of Argent."

Akoya smiled. "It is."

The king let out a frustrated groan. "What on earth make you think that?! I hope you're not spreading this around the palace. The world's beliefs will already be turned upside down by what you found in the cellar."

"If you read any of the books and scrolls I've studied recently, you'll understand why."

"Oh, that silly story about the young fool and the magic mirror?" The king snorted.
"It's history, and the young man was Ibushi. He's the prince of Argent."

"You have no proof of any of this. Argent is a myth, spoken of only by elderly lunatics halfway towards death."

Akoya rose to his feet, eyeing him with confidence. "Ibushi hasn't forgotten Argent. The curse didn't affect him because by then he was trapped in the mirror, and caught in a magical slumber. He could tell you anything about Argent. Ask him to draw you a map of the world, and I'm certain Argent will be at its centre."

"And if he fails--which I suspect he shall?"

"Then by all means cast him from the kingdom, but know that I'll be leaving with him."

"Impossible, you have a wedding to attend."

"Should I ever return to Perla," Akoya said, ignoring the comment. "I'll bring you proof of Argent's existence."

The king took a long gulp of wine, one eye on his son. Then he signalled to his aide. "Bring me the newest map we have!" he called. "As for you, get out of my sight. You have a wedding to prepare for."

Akoya smiled tightly. "You're right, father."

Once he left the room, the king beckoned over the servant, who had stood silently at the edge of the room throughout the entire exchange. "Fetch me more wine," he said. "And whilst you're at it, send for Zundar. I want a word with him."

The atmosphere in Akoya's reception room was deeply uncomfortable. Atsushi had gone there in the belief that he'd have a little time to calm down before his friend returned from talking to the king. But only a short time after his arrival, the door opened again and Kinshirou was shown in by Zundar.

Kinshirou's expression had turned stony when he realised Atsushi was there, and he'd averted his gaze immediately, moving to sit in the other guest chair.

It was a little unfortunate that the two guest chairs were placed so close together. Atsushi had clasped his hands in his lap, drawing his elbows from the arm rests and hunching his shoulders, as though making himself smaller might shield him from the sadness in Kinshirou's face.

It didn't, and the sight of Kinshirou's slumped shoulders and bloodshot eyes only made Atsushi feel worse. His palms itched, and he scratched at them absently. He longed to reach out and take Kinshirou's hand in his own, and promise to marry him.

Except it wasn't possible, was it? The king had forbidden it, and the king's word was law.

It was too late in the day to set off for Aurum.

After watching Atsushi from the corner of his eye for some time, Kinshirou turned his head away. This day was even worse than the day Atsushi had been betrothed to Akoya. That time at least, Atsushi had no choice. Atsushi had rejected him willingly this time, which made it so easy to draw a conclusion to that any simpleton could understand.
Atsushi didn't want to marry him.

Thinking back to their makeshift engagement, Kinshirou thought he should have realised it sooner. Akoya had instigated the entire thing and had effectively put the words into their mouths. He hadn't given Atsushi a chance to argue, and Atsushi had meekly gone along with it.

Yet he'd acted so happy about their engagement. Until their visit to Priest Wombat today, Kinshirou had been convinced he was as excited for their union as he was.

But after such a quick surrender to the priest's words, it was clear that Atsushi had only been pretending.

Which didn't really make any sense. Not when the safety of Atsushi's kingdom was riding on his being married in the next few days.

So why reject him? Did Atsushi actually want to marry Akoya? But that didn't make any sense!

Kinshirou let out a shaky sigh, closing his eyes to the prickling sensation of tears. His body was tense, as if some deep and unreachable part of himself was stretched out on a rack, almost to the point of breaking. He couldn't let it break here, in front of Atsushi. These were Akoya's private rooms, and his friend had invited him here for a reason.

Hopefully that reason wasn't to torture him by leaving Atsushi and himself sitting alone in this dreadful silence.

A quiet, muffled sob disturbed Kinshirou from his thoughts. He looked at Atsushi in surprise, finding him hunched up with a hand over his mouth, tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Atsushi..."

"I want to marry you, Kinchan!" Atsushi gasped out between sobs. "I just...We can't..."

"We'll find a way..." Kinshirou murmured, tears escaping his eyes. The tension was broken, but relief was far from his grasp. He didn't know how they could marry without leaving the kingdom—and there was no time for that anymore. "We'll find a way," he repeated, wishing he could be confident in that. "I want to marry you too, Atchan."

It felt good to say it, and when Kinshirou found his teary-eyed fiancé reaching for him, he leaned in and met him halfway.

The sun was slowly making its way across the sky, and Ibushi's worry grew with every hour that passed. Lunch had been brought to him by some unknown and silent maid, but his tray had yet to be taken away.

Outside, the guards murmured to each other from time to time, but not loudly enough for Ibushi to catch a word of what they said. He'd returned to the window and leaned out, once more considering an escape down the vines, once more thinking better of it.

The best course of action was to remain on his best behaviour, and be civil to everyone, whether they were friend or foe. For the sake of a future with Akoya, he had to win the king's favour. If that meant being polite to the rude and unkind monarch, he would.

From the other side of the door came more voices, and then the familiar clank of the lock. Ibushi
lifted his head at the exact time that Zundar walked in, and raised a brow at what he'd brought with him.

"His Majesty has a request of you, your highness," said Zundar, setting parchment and inks on the table.

"What would his majesty have me do?" Ibushi asked, smiling in a way he hoped gave the impression that he was eager to please.

"He wants you to draw a world map. After that, he wants a full confession of your identity and heritage--the truth, your highness."

Ibushi cringed inwardly. The king wouldn't like the truth. But a lie would always be found out, and such a lie could be held against him.

"Very well, I shall do my best," he said, not completely understanding the king's request for a map. As he began to draw, he thought about this strange request. The king was quick-tempered and refused to believe in things he didn't know about. This request for a map only served to make him seem as much of a lunatic as he'd accused Akoya of being.

"Once you have finished the map, I shall take it to his majesty immediately," said Zundar, watching him with a curious expression.

"Of course," Ibushi nodded, not looking up from his work. "It's best not to keep his majesty waiting." He paused, effecting a polite smile as he lifted his gaze. "By the way, please compliment the head chef on his speciality. I understand why they're Akoya's favourite."

"Prince Akoya enjoys them very much," Zundar uttered, pride in his expression. "He'll be happy that you like them."

Ibushi smiled to himself and got on with the map. The first step to winning the favour of a king was to win the favour of his staff. Complimenting Zundar's brother's cooking seemed to have done the trick.

It didn't take long to finish the map. Ibushi might have been trapped in a magic mirror for a hundred years, but it didn't feel like so long ago that he'd stood in the grand hall at home, looking at the big map on the wall and planning a tour of the neighbouring kingdoms.

That tour had never happened, but Ibushi still remembered Argent's neighbours, and most of the further-flung kingdoms.

He handed the completed map to Zundar, and smiled. "Please tell his majesty I apologise for how amateur it looks. I hope it pleases him."

"Yes, your highness," Zundar nodded. "I shall return later for your confession."

Zundar left the room, the door closing and the lock sliding home behind him.

Still puzzled, Ibushi took up another sheet of parchment and began to write.

"On request of His Majesty the King of Perla, here are the facts of my identity and my heritage. I hope his majesty finds it informative, and will forgive elements that appear most astounding.

"My name is Ibushi Arima, Crown Prince of Argent..."
After the first kiss, it hadn’t taken long for Kinshirou to get out of his chair and move closer. Planted between Atsushi’s knees, he’d leaned in and kissed him again, heart thumping, cheeks burning, fingers tangled in Atsushi’s hair.

Then Atsushi had pulled him into his lap and held him fast, and it felt so sinful to be together like this in the rooms of another, but Kinshirou couldn’t get enough. His tears had dried up, and his heart no longer trembled with sadness, but with excitement.

They would find a way to get married. No law stated they couldn’t wed outside of the palace grounds—Wombat wasn’t the only priest in Perla.

Kinshirou smiled against Atsushi’s lips. He wanted to tell him, but his desire to continue kissing him was even stronger.

Unnoticed, Akoya stood at the door. A faint smile played across his lips as he watched them, a warmth in his chest to see a pair so in love. Yet his heart ached to see it, too. He wanted this for himself, but was being kept apart from the only person who had ever looked at him in that way. Wrapping his arms around himself, Akoya tried to distract himself from that feeling. He was working on Ibushi’s freedom. But right now, he had to work on the wedding of his friends—which was going to happen.

Atsushi and Kinshirou were so absorbed in each other’s presence that they still hadn’t noticed him. Arching a brow, Akoya cleared his throat, loudly.

The pair jerked apart, faces turning matching shades of red as they found him there.

"A-Akoya!" Atsushi straightened his spectacles as Kinshirou jumped up, and blinked guiltily at him. "Sorry, Kinchan and I, um, we—"

Akoya held up a hand to silence him. "Have you decided to be sensible?" he asked. "You're both prepared to get married?"

"Yes, but his majesty has forbidden it," Atsushi reminded him. "So Priest Wombat refuses."

"Atchan..." Kinshirou slipped his hand into Atsushi’s, lacing their fingers together. "There's more than one priest in Perla. We'll find another, who hasn't heard of the king's wishes."

"Huh," Akoya smiled. "That's almost as good as my plan. I hope you're ready to say your vows, because Priest Wombat is on his way here."

Atsushi stared. "Now?! You convinced him?"

"I told him my father has given his approval."

Kinshirou narrowed his eyes. "But he hasn't."

"No."

"You know I don't approve of lies."

Atsushi felt Kinshirou's hand tighten around his own, and glanced at him. "Um. We could go now and find another priest, couldn't we?"

"Wombat will be here very soon," Akoya pointed out. "Once it is done, my father's words hold no
"But he could annul our marriage!" Atsushi protested. He stood up, and shifted closer to Kinshirou. "I don't want that to happen. Epinard would fall into my sister's hands."

"It won't happen," Akoya shook his head. "You know I looked for a legal way to break off our engagement. I know the laws."

Kinshirou shook his head. "Lies get found out."

"Yes, so we have to act fast."

"I don't want my marriage to be based on a lie. Atchan deserves better than that."

Atsushi ducked his head at Kinshirou's words, a bashful smile on his face. Lies weren't the best way to get what they wanted, but he'd take that over not marrying at all.

"I don't mind," he said quietly. "As long as our marriage remains legal."

"It's legal. Now come on, tidy yourselves up before Wombat gets here. I'll wait outside."

Finding themselves ushered to a mirror and given combs, the pair began to prepare.

"Are you sure about this?" Kinshirou asked. "I can wait, if you want to find a different priest."

Atsushi shook his head. "I'm absolutely certain," he said. "I should have realised we could have done this."

"You're not so underhand as to think of it," Kinshirou smiled fondly.

"It's not underhand, it's tactical," Atsushi protested, feeling he ought to at least try and defend their friend. Akoya was doing this for them, after all.

Setting down the comb, Kinshirou leaned in and pressed a kiss to Atsushi's cheek. "My sweet, kind-hearted Atchan," he murmured. "All of Aurum will adore you."

"And all of Epinard will adore you..." Atsushi faltered and smiled ruefully. "Well, except my sister, and her fiancé, and their sympathisers. Things may not be easy in Epinard, for a while."

"Epinard won't fall into civil war, Atchan," Kinshirou said, seeing the doubt in his gaze. He turned Atsushi to face him, and hands settling upon his hips. "The law is the law, and you'll not only have your supporters in Epinard, but the whole of Aurum behind you, too. Epinard will be safe."

Atsushi averted his gaze, teeth worrying at his bottom lip. "...I'm not marrying you for Epinard's sake," he said.

"I know."

"Is it selfish of me?"

Kinshirou shook his head. "It still works in your kingdom's favour."

Atsushi sighed, reaching up to adjust Kinshirou's cravat. "It will be our kingdom, one day..." He smiled, calm flooding his heart the moment he looked into Kinshirou's eyes. "I love you, Kinchan."

Kinshirou smiled back. "I love you too, Atchan."
"Those are words I like to hear on a wedding day," Priest Wombat walked in, ushered by a smugly smiling Akoya. He bowed to the princes, brow knitting with concern. "Please forgive me for misunderstanding you before. I was unaware that his majesty had changed his mind."

"Oh," Atsushi blinked, sharing a look with Kinshirou.

Kinshirou nodded. He didn't know what Akoya had told the priest, so it was difficult to play along. "That's quite alright, Priest Wombat. Please forgive my angry words."

"Words spoken in passion, born of pure love!" Wombat exclaimed. "There is nothing to be forgiven."

Akoya stepped forward, tapping the priest on the shoulder. "Shall we get on with it?" he suggested.

"Eager to be wed, hm?" Wombat smirked knowingly at the princes. "Very well. If the happy couple would like to stand before me--and your highness, if you'd like to stand just over here, as witness..."

They took up positions, and Wombat began to recite the lines of the traditional wedding ceremony.

"We, the free people of the great kingdom of Perla, are gathered here in this room, to witness the union of His Highness Prince Kinshirou Kusatsu of Aurum, and His Highness Prince Atsushi Kinugawa of Epinard, who now join their hands before me..."

Kinshirou smiled at the cue, and gently grasped Atsushi's hands. His heart thumped heavily against his ribs, and he could feel Atsushi was trembling. Smile softening, he stroked the back of Atsushi's hands with his thumbs, and gave his fingers a gentle squeeze.

Atsushi smiled back, unable to tear his gaze from Kinshirou's. Happiness filled him, threatening to spill over onto his cheeks in the form of joyful tears. This was really happening. It wasn't how he'd imagined, and wasn't at all how he'd dreamed, but it was happening, and for all the imaginings and dreams and wishes in the world, he wouldn't change any of it, because the most important part of it all remained the same:

Kinshirou.

It was Kinshirou standing with him before the priest, as beautiful as ever and smiling so radianty that Atsushi found himself falling in love with him all over again.

"Now, Prince Kinshirou, if you would repeat after me," Wombat said.

Kinshirou blinked. He'd been so lost in Atsushi's gaze that he'd barely heard the priest.

"Ah," he nodded.

"I, Prince Kinshirou Kusatsu of Aurum..." prompted Wombat.

"I, Prince--"

Kinshirou broke off when the door slammed open and the king stumbled into the room, wine on his cravat and a piece of parchment crumpled in his hand.

Akoya's heart grew cold as the king stared at the group. He'd thought they would have enough time. How had his father known?!

The king's expression was bewildered at first, but it quickly hardened. He stepped forward, pointing at the group with a trembling finger.
"I command you to stop!"

Wombat fell silent immediately, his usually pink cheeks turning pale.

Atsushi grip tightened on Kinshirou's hands. His pulse pounded in his ears, but at the same time he felt as though his heart had been torn clean from his chest.

The king had caught them. He'd interrupted before they could say their vows.

They still weren't married--maybe now they never would be.

Gulping, Kinshirou squeezed Atsushi's hands and tried to ignore the stinging behind his eyes. They had been so close!

He eyed the king warily, fearful of what would come next.

Gazing around the group, the king rested his hands on his hips, lips twisted in what was neither quite a smile or a grimace.

"I want all of you to go to my private parlour, immediately," the king said firmly. "I want a word with all of you."

He turned on his heel, and the others traipsed glumly after him.

The plan had failed. Now they had to face the consequences.
The king gets some answers--and has some to give, too. His firm declaration leaves the princes surprised, not to mention struggling to process the change in situation. Whilst Atsushi and Kinshirou make plans for the future they desire, Akoya is finally able to spend some time with Ibushi. It would be so much more pleasurable without all the damn staff lurking around...which probably contributed to their fight.

The walk to the king's private parlour was made in tense silence. None of the group dared to look at each other, fearing they might provoke the king's wrath further.

It was impossible to know what the king was thinking. His face was red, and his eyes glistened dangerously beneath his furrowed brow.

Though it must have taken only a scarce few minutes, the walk through the palace felt torturously slow-- a long, arduous walk to certain doom. When they finally reached the parlour, the king called out to his staff and aides, dismissing them all from the room.

The atmosphere of dread grew heavier.

Watching silently, Akoya felt like he couldn't breathe. If his father was sending out even his closest, most trusted aides, this was serious--this was secret. Whatever transpired within this room tonight, his father didn't want anyone else to know about it.

There had been times, he remembered, when people had gone into this room alone with the king, and had never been seen again.

Would he and his friends disappear too?

He swallowed, daring to glance at Kinshirou and Atsushi. The couple had broken apart since they left his room, and stood away from each other, pale and stony-faced. Atsushi stood rigid, shoulders hunched and expression serious, his mouth set in a tight line whilst he frowned from behind his spectacles. Kinshirou stood with a straight back and head held high, but the bobbing of his adam's apple betrayed his nervous swallowing, and his eyes glistened with the threat of tears.

Akoya bowed his head, stomach clenching.

He'd failed them.

He'd failed them both.

After all he'd done to escape the arranged marriage with Atsushi, his discovery of Atsushi's relationship with Kinshirou and his subsequent plan to ensure they married, it had all come to nothing.

Now his father had found out, and was stomping about the room, shooing out the last of his staff.

When the door closed behind the last of the king's aides, Akoya closed his eyes and waited for the
shouting to start.

Kinshirou didn't dare move. In all the years he'd studied in Perla, he'd never seen the king in this mood. He couldn't even tell what this mood was.

But he could guess at what was to come.

Banishment from Perla, maybe. To be sent home in shame, away from Atsushi. To know Atsushi would then have no choice but to marry Akoya, for the sake of Epinard's safety.

Until recently, Kinshirou had thought the king firm and righteous, with his kingdom's best interests at heart.

Now he understood that the king wasn't righteous at all. He was cruel.

As the king paced back and forth, frowning at the crumpled-up map in his hands, Kinshirou prayed. He was by no means religious, but if magic existed, maybe there was some benevolent power out there that would help them, too.

Before tonight, they'd had options. Now that the king had caught them in the midst of their illicit wedding ceremony, nearly all those options had been obliterated.

His only hope was that somehow, Atsushi and himself could escape this situation and run away. They could go to Aurum. They could take Akoya—and Ibushi, if they could break him out.

There had to be a way.

There was always some kind of solution.

But as the king finally stopped pacing and surveyed the group with a scowl, Kinshirou wondered if his time to find it had run out.

When the king's gaze passed over him, Atsushi lowered his head and finally gave in to the trembling. His shoulders shook, and each breath was never quite deep enough, and he couldn't quite seem to unclench his hands.

It was over.

The king had found them and stopped them, and it was over.

He could never marry Kinshirou.

He'd have to marry Akoya.

Just as their fathers had planned.

He stared at the floor, vision blurring. He'd been foolish to hope that he and Kinshirou could be happy. He'd been foolish to believe they could get married, that he could save Epinard and be happy.

Of course he couldn't be happy. He'd be king one day, and kings had to put their kingdom above all else, including their own wants and needs. Including their own happiness.
"Your majesty?"

Atsushi glanced aside when Priest Wombat spoke unbidden. The rotund peered beseechingly at the king, the colour starting to return to his cheeks.

"Yes, Wombat?" the king sighed.

"Please forgive me. I was under the impression that you had called for the ceremony to immediately go ahead. Had I known otherwise, I--"

"Shut up and sit down."

Wombat abruptly fell silent, and plonked down in the nearest chair.

Atsushi stared at the floor as he waited for the king to speak.

"I am astounded that you would go against my wishes and attempt to marry without my knowledge..." The king's voice was quiet, but his tone bore a low growl that suggested rage.

"Father, I take full responsibility," Akoya stepped forward. "I lied to Priest Wombat, and I..." he frowned. "I persuaded Atsushi and Kinshirou to agree to the ceremony."

"You take full responsibility, do you?" The king approached his son, gaze hard. "You lied to a priest, and you attempted to coerce your friends into marriage."

"Yes." Akoya stared back. His heart thumped so hard he could feel it all the way to his toes. He wanted to look away, wanted to turn and run and take his friends with him. But if he took the blame for this, Kinshirou and Atsushi would still have hope of marriage. If he took the blame, maybe he'd be imprisoned, or disowned and thrown out of Perla. It hurt to imagine, but if any of those things happened to him, maybe they'd happen to Ibushi too. So long as he could still hope to be with him - near him would do - he could stand there and take responsibility.

This was all his fault anyway.

Just as he thought he couldn't bear to stare back at his father any longer, the king turned away.

"I see," he said. "And your friends agreed to the marriage."

"I persuaded them," Akoya repeated.

The king snorted. "They agreed," he repeated, eyes resting on Atsushi and Kinshirou. "The three of you conspired to trick Priest Wombat into carrying out a wedding ceremony in secret."

Atsushi winced. He didn't know why Akoya was so intent on taking the blame for this, but when he tried to speak up and protest, he couldn't find his voice, and his words died on his tongue. All he could do was stand there trembling, longing to take Kinshirou's hand, and wishing the floor would open and swallow him up.

Nearby, painfully close yet too far to reach, Kinshirou swallowed hard. The prickling behind his eyes had stopped, so there was no longer a threat of tears. Kinshirou just felt numb. He wondered if this was how a criminal felt as they awaited their sentence.

The way the king looked at him certainly made him feel like a criminal.

"Well?" The king tapped his foot, impatient. "Did you or did you not attempt to have a secret ceremony?"
"Yes," Akoya replied quietly.

The king huffed. "Let me make this perfectly clear to you—all of you, and that includes you, Wombat. There are to be no secret wedding ceremonies within my palace. Is that understood?"

"Yes, your majesty, of course!" Wombat agreed.

"Understood, Akoya?" the king prompted. "And you two—is this understood?"

"Yes, father." Akoya gulped.

"Yes, your majesty." Atsushi winced at the scratchiness of his voice.

"...Understood..." Kinshirou spoke quietly, finally averting his eyes. It was over. The king wouldn't let them off with anything so simple as a mild reprimand. They'd gone against his wishes, and a king's wishes were akin to law.

Whatever was to come next, it wouldn't be nice.

"Good, I'm glad you understand..." The king turned away, pacing to his chair. Then he sat down and smiled. "As I was saying, there will be no secret wedding ceremonies in my palace. Here, you must do everything by the book—and that means we are doing this properly."

Akoya stared at his father. What was he trying to say? He didn't dare hope it was what it sounded like.

"I must say you've created something of a problem with your scheming, Akoya," the king said. He motioned to the chairs set opposite him. "Sit down, you three. Wombat, bring that chair closer. Between us, we should find a solution."

"A solution to what, your majesty?" Wombat asked.

The king raised his brows. "A solution to how Prince Atsushi will marry Prince Kinshirou without bringing shame upon Perla, of course."

"You'll let it happen?!!" Akoya had to be dreaming. His father would never do something so...so kind! "Why?!"

"A king must pay attention to the needs of his guests," the king replied. "Especially those who are such close allies to his kingdom. Now come along. Sit down."

Tentative, the group sat down, sharing uncertain glances. Something had changed the king's mind. They could only hope that he didn't change it again.

As the group discussed the matters surrounding the marriage, Atsushi didn't dare reach for Kinshirou. He kept his hands firmly in his lap, and with every second that passed, he expected the king to inform them that they'd fallen into a trap, that they'd never marry, because he forbade it, and that he was going to throw them into the dungeon.

Except that moment never came.

The king discussed the matter calmly, revealing a shrewdness Atsushi never knew he possessed, and a tactical mind that rivalled Kinshirou's. Atsushi didn't think he was any good with planning, so he remained quiet. Kinshirou and Akoya did most of the talking, and with the king's input, a new plan began to unfold.
It was only when they were dismissed that Kinshirou started to believe what was happening. Not that it made any sense.

The king, who had been so vehemently against their marriage, had spent the better part of an hour discussing how to make it happen. It would happen soon, too.

There was no avoiding the gossip that would arise from what was to come, and Kinshirou regretted that Akoya would bear the worst of it. Though his friend had insisted he didn't mind - had even said his reputation couldn't get much worse - the gossip would hurt. Gossip like that always did, and Akoya had never been popular.

He was about to become even less so.

"Akoya, stay here," called the king, behind the group.

"Yes, father."

Akoya's response was quiet, and Kinshirou worried for him. Surely the king had said enough tonight. What more could he want of him?

But he couldn't linger around to eavesdrop. Priest Wombat was already ushering them from the room, mumbling about needing to discuss the finer details of their marriage.

Kinshirou peeked at Atsushi as they passed through the door. Atsushi looked up and gave him a faint smile, a smile that revealed he, too, was worried.

"It will be alright," Kinshirou said softly.

Atsushi smiled a little more, shoulders relaxing. "If you say it, I can believe it."

Kinshirou took Atsushi's hand then, his grip firm and reassuring. He couldn't say for sure that everything would work out well. Akoya was still in trouble, and Ibushi was still shut away somewhere. They hadn't even met Ibushi properly yet. But if Akoya cared about him, and he cared about Akoya, then he was their friend too.

If they needed help, Kinshirou would give it. He knew that Atsushi would, too.

Though he hoped it wouldn't come to that: only a fool took a king as his enemy.

Once he was alone with his son, the king sat forward in his chair and spread out a map on the table. It was crudely drawn, by a hand unpractised in map-making, and bore a number of differences to the world as it was today.

He'd crumpled it up upon seeing it, too stunned by what was there to believe it. But then he'd taken a moment to think about it, and had smoothed the parchment out, and looked upon the map more closely.

He gazed at it again now, biding his time as he waited for his son to take responsibility for this, too.

Akoya said nothing, merely waited at a respectful distance, and eventually the king sighed and looked up at him.
"I don't know how you conspired with your friend to do this, but he delivered," he stated, jabbing a finger at where Argent lay on the map. "The mythical kingdom of Argent, nestled snugly beside our own fair Perla."

Akoya swallowed down the urge to raise his voice to the accusation. "I didn't conspire with Ibushi," he said. "That map depicts the world as Ibushi remembers it."

"How do you expect me to believe you, when you lied to a priest, of all people?"

"That was different. I lied because Kinshirou and Atsushi deserve happiness. I'm not lying now, father. I have nothing to do with the drawing of that map."

"You suggested I have him draw one."

"Yes, because I thought by seeing it, you would finally believe the truth," Akoya was starting to feel irritable. The past couple of days had put a real strain on him, and most of that could be traced back to his father's refusal to believe anything he said.

"He put Argent in the centre of the map, as you said he would."

"Every cartographer puts their own kingdom at the centre."

The king sniffed and studied the map closer. "Your friend is hardly a cartographer," he observed. "He drew this with confidence, but he drew badly. These coastlines are all wrong. Even a child could copy a map better than this."

"Ibushi didn't copy it."

"I know." The king sat back and sighed. "Akoya, for the past three years you've proven yourself an extremely tiring young man. You've been unbearable. Then over these last few days, you've single-handedly brought to light the existence of things that shouldn't exist. Magic, dragons..." he shook his head. "I wondered what was next. I did not expect it to be an entire lost kingdom."

"Do you believe me?" Akoya finally noticed how exhausted he looked. The king's shoulders slumped wearily, his eyes were heavy-lidded and dark-ringed, and his flesh was pallid. He looked like a man who had slept very little over the past few nights.

A faint smile formed upon the king's lips. "My life is easier if I do," he uttered resignedly. "I believe that you believe it, son. I can't claim to believe it is true."

"Father--" Akoya broke off, shaking his head. There was no point in pressing the matter. His father agreeing to believe in his belief was the best he could expect. "Why did you change your mind about Kinshirou and Atsushi?" he asked, changing the subject.

The king shrugged. "Once I saw this map, which I agreed to on your demand, I decided to give in to this idea of their marriage, and see if it also led to something so surprising."

"Did it?"

"Your lies and manipulation were, for once, selfless, so I would say it did." The king began to roll up the map. "Had I known of Prince Atsushi's involvement with Kinshirou, I would never have agreed to your engagement."

Akoya couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Really?" he asked. "You wouldn't have arranged the marriage if you'd known?"
"Of course not! Aurum has been a firm ally of Perla for centuries. It would not do to upset the future king. I would rather you remain unmarried, and here in the palace."

"But I thought you wanted rid of me..." Akoya gulped, face hot. Hadn't his father sat there, not so long ago, and drunkenly gloated that he'd be leaving soon? That he'd be happy to see him go?

"I still do," the king settled back in his chair, the map set aside. "I told you, you've been extremely tiring. We spoilt you too much as a child, and you became unbearable. Your mother and I wanted you married so you'd go out into the world and learn something of it. And this palace would finally be peaceful and free of childish tantrums."

Akoya wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that statement. On the one hand, it shed light on his father's eagerness to be rid of him. On the other, his father accused him of behaviour he had long since stopped, thanks to Ibushi's guidance.

So he didn't throw a tantrum, as he might once have done, or as his father might have expected. Instead, he shook his head and stated his argument calmly. "With respect, father, you will have noticed my behaviour has improved since the engagement."

"Aside from your foray into the forest and your accident, yes. Your mother and I assumed Prince Atsushi is a good influence on you."

"He is a good and loyal friend, but it's Ibushi you should thank for my improvement," Akoya replied. "He helped me to realise my bad behaviour for what it was. He gave me advice and understanding, and friendship. Without him, I wouldn't have been able to become who I am now."

The king nodded thoughtfully. "I still have doubts about who he is, you know. But I can't deny that you've improved. Overlooking this marriage nonsense, you're becoming the son your mother and I always--Yes, come in!" He interrupted himself when a knock sounded at the door.

The king's chief aide peeked in, a sheaf of parchment in his hand. "Your majesty, please forgive my intrusion."

"Yes, what is it?"

"I have here the document you requested from the...guest."

"At last! Bring it here!" The king held out his hand for the pages, and began to skim through the ornate handwriting the moment he grasped hold of them.

From where he stood, Akoya tried to catch a glimpse of what his father was reading, but couldn't quite see it.

Two pages in, the king's brows rose, and he called for his aide. "Have the guest brought here immediately," he said, still reading. "I believe it's time I granted him an audience."

Akoya cleared his throat, quietly reminding his father of his presence.

The king glanced at him. "You stay there," he said.

So Akoya waited, with growing agitation, for the aide to bring the 'guest' to the room, and when the door opened again and Ibushi was shown in, it was all he could do not to race over and sweep him into his arms.
"Prince Ibushi Arima of Argent," the king stated, as Ibushi dropped to his knee and bowed. "Come closer. I'm aware that you're acquainted with my son, so I shan't waste time with introductions."

"Yes, your majesty," Ibushi rose with practised grace, and approached the king. He stopped when he was level with Akoya, and shot him a quick glance. Ibushi didn't know what he was doing here, or why the king had called for him, but Akoya's expression didn't fill him with confidence. Akoya looked on edge.

Brandishing the sheaf of pages that bore Ibushi's story, the king stepped forward. "Is all of this true?" he asked.

"Every word of it, your majesty," Ibushi confirmed.

"Did my son tell you to write any of it?"

"I haven't had the pleasure of his company since we were last together in your presence, your majesty."

The king stared at him hard. Then he turned away and looked at Akoya. "Son, do you know of your great-grandfather's most unique feature?"

Akoya shook his head, visibly perplexed. "His eyes?" he ventured. The entire Gero family was known for having particularly bright blue eyes.

"Not his eyes, no. Here. Read this." The king passed him a page from the sheaf, motioning to a particular line. "Aloud, now."

Akoya scanned over the few lines beforehand, quickly realising this was Ibushi's handwriting. "My earliest memory was meeting the king of a neighbouring kingdom," he read. "His majesty had hair the colour of cherry blossoms, and eyes as bright as the summer sky, and when we were alone, he entertained me by removing his gloves and making shadow puppets. I don't recall the scenes he created, but I do remember that he had six fingers upon his left hand. I remarked upon it, as any child would, and he laughed and told me to keep it a secret, because people were afraid of witch kings. This is the first time I have told it."

"Father, did--"

"My grandfather had six fingers, yes," the king nodded. "He wore gloves to hide it, and only removed them upon his death bed, which is the sole time I saw his hands with my own eyes. In his youth it was considered the mark of a witch, so his deformity was a closely-guarded secret within the family." He looked sharply at Ibushi. "No other man alive should know of it."

"Father, I told you, Ibushi was--"

"Trapped in a mirror by nefarious magic-workers, only to be freed by you. I know." The king sighed heavily and slumped down in his chair. "Prince Ibushi, I hope you'll enjoy your stay here in Perla. My staff will appoint you to quarters more suited to your station, and should you require any guidance, I'm sure my son will provide you with what you need."

"Thank you, your majesty," Hiding his surprise, Ibushi bowed in his old fashioned way. "I am indebted to you for your kindness."

"And I am told I should thank you for the improvement in my son's behaviour," the king sat up straighter. "I pray you'll continue to tutor him in good manners."

"Of course, your majesty," Ibushi smiled. "It would be my pleasure."
"I'm sure," the king rolled his eyes and once again took up Ibushi's story. "Begone, you two. My aide will provide you with a private supper. I'm sure you have matters to catch up on."

As Ibushi rose to his feet, Akoya stepped forward, eyes wide.

"Father--"

"Go, Akoya. Before I change my mind."

"...Thank you." Akoya said it in a whisper, and meant it for the first time in many years.

Kinshirou and Atsushi spent several long hours in Priest Wombat's apartment, discussing what Wombat called 'the fine details' of the wedding.

Atsushi had been through this with Akoya, and very little was going to change in the plans, so it felt like a waste of time. There were other, more important things to do than sit and rehash everything they'd already discussed.

Yet this was new to Kinshirou, who sat there seriously for the entire meeting, speaking up when appropriate--confirming to Wombat that yes, he understood the importance and sanctity of marriage, and that yes, he was completely certain this was what he wanted.

That, at least, made the whole thing worth it. When Atsushi and Akoya had answered the same questions regarding marriage to each other, neither had meant it when they said they were certain. They'd lied, they'd known each other was lying--the priest had known, too.

This time, when Wombat asked the questions of him, Atsushi answered with a wholehearted yes. Beside him, holding his hand, Kinshirou's confirmation has been equally as honest.

So Atsushi could sit there and go through everything all over again, because this time it was real, and this marriage was wanted.

Still, he couldn't help but cringe when Wombat stopped asking all the usual questions, and started on one of his lectures about love.

Noticing the way he tensed, Kinshirou squeezed his hand and spoke up, interrupting the priest.

"Atsushi and I love each other deeply, Priest Wombat," he said calmly. "We have nurtured this love from feelings of affection that began to bloom the moment we set eyes upon each other. You need not explain it to us, for we know it well."

"Oh," said Wombat. "You must forgive me, your highnesses. It's a rare and blessed thing for couples to wed for true love these days. Most come to me for a marriage of convenience."

"Of course," Atsushi smiled wryly. "I wouldn't want to be trapped in a marriage like that."

"It will never be a marriage like that," Kinshirou rose to his feet, a gentle tug to Atsushi's hand encouraging him to do the same. "We must take our leave. We still have much to do."

"By all means, enjoy your evening," Wombat stood, smiling as he ushered them to the door. "Next time I see you two, it will be at the ceremony."

The princes smiled at each other. It wouldn't be long now. They had the king's permission, which was almost as good as his blessing. Everything was falling into place.
Hand in hand, they strolled through the deserted corridors surrounding Wombat's apartment, only breaking apart when they reached the hustle and bustle of the courtyard.

But they were joined again soon after that. For it took scant few minutes to reach the privacy of Atsushi's rooms at a fast pace. They gave in to their passions the moment they were alone they were together, hands roaming and lips meeting, chest to chest and hip to hip, hearts pounding in unison.

It was going to happen.

They were going to be wed.

Later, when their pulses had slowed and they lay together, breathless and sweaty in the summer heat, Atsushi rolled onto his side and smiled down at Kinshirou. His love was flushed from head to toe, his eyes heavy-lidded and drowsy.

Beautiful. Kinshirou was beautiful. He always had been.

"What are you thinking about, Atchan?" Kinshirou smiled, fingers trailing across Atsushi's cheek.

"The moment I realised I'm in love with you." Atsushi caught Kinshirou's hand in his own and kissed his palm. "I'd been waiting to see you for months, and there was so much I wanted to show you, so much I wanted to do with you when you visited. But the weather was terrible on your day of arrival, with no sign of letting up. Nothing I'd planned could go ahead. I was so disappointed, so angry at myself for not thinking of alternatives..." Atsushi kissed Kinshirou's bare ring finger. "Then your party arrived, and I ran out to greet you, and the moment you alighted from your carriage I- I knew..." He trailed off, a soft smile on his face as he recalled that day. "The moment I saw you, it no longer mattered that we couldn't do those things. I stopped feeling angry the instant that you smiled at me, and knew that it didn't matter what we did, because what mattered most was you, Kinchan."

"Atchan..." Kinshirou leaned up, delivering a delicate kiss to his lips. "You don't know how many times I dreamed about that visit," he admitted. "I'd been eager for it too."

Curling his arms around him, Atsushi tilted his head. "When did you know, Kinchan?"

"Nothing so romantic, I'm afraid," Kinshirou replied, settling down again and nuzzling his jaw. "I was in my rooms here, reading over your newest letter. My day had been tiring, but seeing your words lifted me. I thought about that, and how I longed to talk with you in person, and..." He smiled faintly. "I realised, Atchan, that I was imagining spending my life with you. My love for you seemed rather obvious with that."

A bubble of joy rose in Atsushi's chest, and a laugh escaped his lips, soft and happy.

"I thought you said it wasn't romantic, Kinchan," he said.

"It isn't. I was just alone, and thinking."

"Thinking of me," Atsushi cupped his jaw, gaze longing as he recalled the lonely weeks waiting for Kinshirou's next visit. "I thought of you when I was alone, too."

"Neither of us are alone anymore. We're together now, Atchan."

"Always."

The lips met, and in the peace and privacy of Atsushi's room, they became absorbed in their togetherness, the quiet pierced only by soft sighs and murmurs of each others name.
After being sent on their way by the king, Akoya had expected to finally get some time alone with Ibushi. But his father's aide had suggested a tour of the palace, and Ibushi had gratefully accepted, which had led to a long (and in Akoya's opinion, boring) walk around the entire palace, whilst the aide droned on about this and that.

The tour ended at one of the better guest apartments. The aide informed them this would be Ibushi's new residence for the duration of his stay, introduced a number of staff members who would attend to him, and promptly gave instruction for supper to be served to the princes right there in the parlour.

Ibushi listened attentively whilst the aide showed him around his new rooms, nodding in the appropriate places and seeming more interested than was necessary.

Akoya hung back, a little annoyed, and watched as two maids set the table. This was to be his first meal with Ibushi, and they'd be alone at last...

"Candles," he said, disturbing the nearest maid from her task. He cleared his throat, and smiled. "Could you please place some candles on the table? And flowers...Roses. The ones that grow beneath my window."

"Of course, your highness. I'll fetch some right away." The maid bowed, and shot a glance at her companion before slipping from the room.

Akoya knew the staff be gossiping tonight. As far as they knew, Ibushi had appeared out of nowhere, and was now being settled into rooms suited to a prince, and their very own prince was going to have a private, candlelit supper with him. Nobody could mistake this as an ordinary supper between allies or friends. Not with candles and flowers.

Sighing, Akoya dropped down into one of the chairs at the table. The gossip would get worse tomorrow. But it was okay. He'd been the subject of gossip for years. A little more wouldn't hurt. Ibushi was here now. A little gossip didn't matter that much...

"Your highness?"

"Yes?" Akoya lifted his gaze to meet that of the other maid. She was peering at him with a creased brow, but averted her eyes shyly when he looked at her. Akoya smiled gently. "What is it?"

"Your highness looks...um..." her eyes darted. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Brows rising, Akoya shook his head. "You've done a good job here. Thank you."

"Oh. I-I meant...Your highness, um..."

"I'm fine," Akoya said, quietly kicking himself for letting someone see his pensiveness. "Thank you for worrying about me."

"U-um...Your highness..." the maid bowed and fled, her cheeks bright red.

"Are you terrorising my new staff?" Ibushi smirked as he joined him at the table.

"Not terrorising, just talking," Akoya smiled at him, mood lifting. "She's nice. They deserve your kindness, Ibushi."

At that moment, the first maid returned, and bowed before adding the flowers and candles to the
"Supper will arrive shortly, your highnesses," she said quietly, lighting the candles.

"Thank you very much," Ibushi smiled handsomely, and the woman blushed. "I'm very grateful for your service."

"It's an honour, your highness!" The maid all but squeaked as she bowed, and hurried from the room at a similar pace to her companion.

Akoya smirked. "Now who is terrorising your staff?"

"I was merely being grateful. It's the done thing in my kingdom," Ibushi's reply was good-natured, and served with another handsome smile, more tender than the one he'd given the maid. "Gratitude goes a long way, Akoya."

"I know that..." Akoya signalled to the aide, who was still hovering at the edge of the room. "Thank you for your help. You can go now. Please make sure that Ibushi's staff are all given some tea and a serving of Dadacha's macarons later. Have some for yourself too, of course."

The aide gave an awkward smile. "With respect, your highness, I must remain here, just in case your highnesses need something."

"We don't--"

"Thank you," Ibushi interrupted, taking this new development in his stride. It had been too much to hope the king wouldn't want to keep an eye on them for a while. No king in his right mind let a stranger roam his palace without sending someone to spy on him.

"Ibushi..." Akoya pouted, not liking their lack of privacy.

"I know. It's alright." Ibushi gazed at him reassuringly. "You always give people macarons, don't you?"

Huffing, Akoya nodded. "Yes, because they're good and sweet."

"Like you, hm?"

Colour rose in Akoya's cheeks. "Ibushi, we're in public. How can you say such a thing?"

"We're in private, and it's the truth." Ibushi gazed at him fondly, warmth fluttering through his stomach when he saw the way Akoya's face grew pinker.

Gaze darting to the aide, Akoya pursed his lips. He wanted the man to go! Was this his father's punishment for lying to Wombat? Ugh! He just wanted to be alone with Ibushi--was that too much to ask?!

The aide was trying not to smirk. "Just pretend I am not here, your highness," he said. "Anything said or done before me shall remain confidential."

'Confidential between you and father,' Akoya thought, putting on a smile. "Then I hope Ibushi and I don't tire you with our conversation. We have much to talk about."

The smirk grew more visible. "Never, your highness. I live to serve."

"Then perhaps you could find out where supper has got to?" Ibushi suggested. "I'm rather hungry
after the informative tour you gave us."

As if on cue, there was a knock at the door. The aide answered, and three waiters carried trays into the room bearing food and drink.

The princes fell quiet as their meal was set out on the table, murmuring soft thank yous to the staff when they were done.

"I hope your highnesses enjoy their meal," said the aide, once he'd ushered the waiters out.

"I'm sure we shall," Ibushi smiled across at Akoya. "This looks delicious."

"Then let's eat."

Conversation was slightly awkward over supper. With the aide present, it was hard to discuss the things that had happened between them, and not a word could be spoken of Kinshirou and Atsushi's upcoming marriage.

Ibushi found the experience pleasant, if a little weird to think about. This was his first social meal in over a hundred years, yet due to his magic-induced slumber it felt like only a matter of weeks. Still, he couldn't have chosen a better person to eat with. He smiled as Akoya talked, amused by his description of his father's face upon meeting the dragon.

"...after that, he had no choice but to accept it as fact. He couldn't explain away a dragon, even a dead one." Akoya smiled smugly.

Chuckling, Ibushi nodded. "Nobody can deny a dragon. I hope I have the opportunity to see it, too."

"I'll show you tomorrow. The cellars are dirty, so you'll need old..." Akoya trailed off, eyeing him.

Ibushi quirked a brow. "Old what?"

"Clothes!" Akoya sat up straighter. "Ibushi, you need new clothes!"

"But you just said I need old ones."

"You know what I mean." Akoya rolled his eyes at the teasing, and looked at the aide. "Ibushi needs new clothes. Lots of them. Shirts, breeches, waistcoats, frock coats... Everything! And footwear. Boots, slippers, formal shoes. Can you send for the tailor, and the cobbler?"

"It's already in hand, your highness."

"Oh good. Tell the tailor to make use of the fabrics in my personal store. The earth tones especially." He smiled at Ibushi. "And maybe a little black and grey?"

Somewhat taken aback by the sudden outburst of enthusiasm, Ibushi raised a brow. "I place myself in your hands," he said. "Thank you."

"It's nothing, Ibushi. You can't roam the palace in that outdated outfit."

"I'll have you know this was the height of fashion where I came from." Ibushi grinned.

"You mean a--" Akoya glanced at the aide. He didn't know how much the man knew about Ibushi, or how much he believed of it. "A kingdom stuck a hundred years in the past," he finished, a slight frown forming on his face. "Ibushi, about your proposal that night, before my father arrived..."
At the edge of Ibushi's vision, the aide tensed. "Ah, yes," Ibushi nodded. "It still stands, Akoya."

"And I still wholeheartedly accept," Akoya's frown eased a little. "I'm sorry we couldn't go ahead with it immediately. But there were complications."

"Yet those complications led to a better situation, didn't they?" Ibushi smiled. "You're on better terms with his majesty, and you discovered more...knowledge."

"Knowledge I haven't had a chance to learn yet," Akoya sighed. It was difficult to speak freely with the aide in earshot, and even harder to speak vaguely whilst still making himself understood. "I'm sure that somewhere amongst those scrolls is the key to aiding your kingdom, Ibushi. I could..." He paused, tentative and unsure. "It sounds foolish."

"Nothing you say can sound foolish to me. What is it?"

"...I could feel it."

"Then I have faith in that," Ibushi's gaze was sincere. He could see Akoya's uncertainty, and wanted to reach out and take his hand and speak comforting words. Now that he was free of the mirror, he had the ability to touch him if he wished. Technically, at least.

Ibushi shot a glance at the aide, and folded his hands. The mirror had been one thing, but the presence of the king's staff presented a whole new barrier between Akoya and himself, and it wasn't something that magic could free them from. Or was it...?

Resting his chin in his hand, Akoya looked on as Ibushi's expression became thoughtful. It was a surprisingly charming expression, intelligent and full of warmth.

Akoya eyed him. "I won't be angry if you don't have faith in our finding the knowledge we need," he said quietly. "The chances are slim."

"But I do have faith. I believe in it wholeheartedly." The thoughtful look faded from Ibushi's eyes, and he leaned forward. "I believe in you."

Akoya wanted to say that he was one of the few who did, but it felt so melodramatic, especially with the aide there to hear it. So he smiled instead. "I won't let you down, Ibushi."

"I know you won't. You'll learn knowledge stronger than what you already know."

Akoya sighed, thinking back to the last time he'd used his magic. It had been the last time he'd been with Ibushi, when he'd demonstrated it to his father in desperate hope of convincing him. And when he'd used it to disarm his father, to prevent him from harming Ibushi...

Sitting up straight, he tilted his head. "Ibushi. That night in my room..." Seeing the way the aide stiffened, he added, "When my father was there."

"Not the best situation in which to meet a king, but what about it?"

"A lot happened in a very small stretch of time." Akoya raised his brows, thinking of the rushing feeling, the silvery blur that had surrounded Ibushi and himself when his father had lunged towards them.

"Sometimes that's how things happen," Ibushi nodded.

"Magic, Ibushi," Akoya uttered, weary of keeping the matter quiet. Everyone would know about
magic, soon enough. His father knew about it, and if the aide was surprised, he didn't show it. "Not everything that happened there was my magic." He narrowed his eyes slightly. "Father mentioned a shield of chains, and there was that...blurriness around us, like a bubble. That was you, wasn't it?"

Ibushi smiled sheepishly. "Just a little defence magic."

"You never told me that you could work magic too!"

"You never asked..."

Akoya pouted. "Ibushi, there were plenty of times when I asked you to tell me about yourself. Why did you never tell me you can work magic?"

Ibushi raised his brows, unable to discern why Akoya was getting worked up about this. "I didn't want to encourage you to seek it out," he said truthfully. "Magic is dangerous. It got me into the trouble you found me in, and--"

"It got you out of that trouble, too."

"Yes, and it nearly imprisoned you as a result."

"But you didn't let that happen."

"Of course not, Akoya. I couldn't let you doom yourself to that fate. I--" Ibushi frowned. I love you, he wanted to say. But he didn't want to say it in front of the aide. He wanted to remain at Akoya's side, and such a declaration would surely foul his favour with the king.

"You should have told me!" Anger bloomed in Akoya's mind. The day had been too long, too stressful, and this was the final straw. "You all but forbade me from using magic, when you discovered I could work it! How dare you do that only to reveal that you can use it yourself?!"

"As a prince, I was tutored in the use of magic as a last resort. Magic is to be respected, and the magic I work is mainly defensive." Ibushi's eyes narrowed. "I tried to dissuade you for your own good, but you remained stubborn as ever."

"Yes," Akoya replied, rising from his seat. "And my stubbornness was for your own good, Ibushi. Without it, you'd still be trapped."

"Maybe I would be, but you would have remained safe."

"I didn't want to be safe! I wanted to help you. It would have been fine if I'd been trapped, so long as you were free."

Ibushi jumped to his feet. "It would have worked out for you too, wouldn't it? No more arranged marriage, no more meeting expectations. You would have just disappeared..."

"That has nothing to do with it!" Akoya made no effort to hide how much Ibushi's word hurt. He breathed shakily, lower lip wobbling. "...Do you really think so little of me?" he asked, eyes starting to sting. "It was the best option for everyone. If I was gone, everyone would be happy! Nobody needs me here, Ibushi."

"I need you." Ibushi walked closer, aching to hold him. The argument left a bitter taste in his mouth, and all he wanted was to draw him close, to talk and to soothe him. To love him.

But the slightest movement at the edge of the room reminded Ibushi of the aide's presence, and he
faltered, arms hanging loosely at his sides.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

Averting his eyes, Akoya hugged himself and let out a sigh. "I didn't do it for selfish reasons," he said. "I did it for you. And for Kinshirou, and Atsushi... My parents, too." His expression became more pinched, and Ibushi's desire to hold him grew stronger.

"Akoya, I believe you. I'm sorry." Ibushi returned to his seat, before the impulse to embrace him got too strong. "I shouldn't have said it. That's not the person you are."

"No, it isn't," Akoya agreed quietly. "Not anymore."

"You're far better than that. Forgive me?"

Akoya's shoulders slumped. "You know how I feel about--" he glanced at the aide, who wasn't even pretending not to listen. "Of course you're forgiven, Ibushi."

Ibushi smiled gently. "I'm grateful for all you've done for me, you know."

"The feeling is mutual." Akoya finally met his gaze, a lump forming in the back of his throat. He could cope with the gossip of the masses. But the tiniest accusation from Ibushi was more than he could take. Ibushi hadn't meant it - that much was evident in his apologetic gaze - but the words had still hurt. It was more than he could deal with at that moment, and he was damned if he was going to cry in front of one of his father's closest aides.

Lifting his chin, Akoya took a deep breath. "It's getting late. I'll take my leave now, and shall call on you tomorrow."

"Akoya..."

"Goodnight, Ibushi."

"...Goodnight..." Ibushi watched as Akoya swept from the room, head held high. The bitterness hadn't left him, it had only grown, fed by guilt. He didn't like to argue, preferring to keep the peace, but his and Akoya's passions had raged too fiercely tonight, and he'd spoken unkindly. Akoya may have been selfish and flawed when they first met, but he wasn't like that now. To accuse him of such was to ignore everything that had passed between them since that time.

"Will that be all, sir?" asked the aide, stepping from the shadows.

Ibushi glanced at him, irritation flaring up in his chest. If not for this damn aide, he and Akoya might not have argued!

"More than enough, thank you," he forced out, smiling with clenched teeth.

"Then I shall send for the staff to clear up and draw you a bath."

With that, the aide strolled out of the door, leaving Ibushi to mull over the argument alone.

If only they'd been in private, he thought. Then he could have drawn Akoya close and held him, kissed him, and they might never have got onto the subject of magic.

Ibushi sighed. Once again, magic had interfered with his life--this time without even being used.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

An engagement, an arrival, and a dragon: everything is going to plan.
Nothing can go wrong...right?

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's taken so long to get this chapter up! I wanted to finish chapter 8 before I posted this one, and that got put on hold whilst I took part in Boueibu Happy Kiss week.
It's now done, and I'm pushing on to chapter 9, so here is a nice, shiny chapter 7, full of Things.

The morning was sunny, and brought with it a murmur of rumours. Kinshirou had snuck back to his rooms before sunrise, and messed up the blankets to make it look as if he'd spent all night there.
His staff arrived at their usual time, and gossiped quietly among themselves as they went about making the bed, laying out his clothes, and drawing him a bath, whilst Kinshirou himself sat at the dressing table in his room and feigned interest in some old correspondence.

"Did you hear about the new prince?" A maid's voice echoed from the bathroom.

"Tall and handsome, I've been told," replied another, amidst the splash of water. "My girl is on his staff. Told me all about him. Our very own prince dined with him last night."

"Is it true about the roses?"

"My girl picked them herself, on his highness' orders!"

"Poor Prince Atsushi. Not even married yet and our prince is already cheating."

"Hush, girl! Watch your words here."

"Sorry. But it sounds awfully romantic, doesn't it?"

"The sort of romance that should be shared between lovers, if you know what I mean."

The maids laughed quietly between themselves, and Kinshirou scowled. Though this gossip would work in his favour, he disliked that it reflected badly on Akoya. Loyalty urged him to defend his friend, but there was nothing he could say to put him in their favour.

"It is too early for chatter," he called out, for want of anything better to say. "Please keep it for your free time, ladies."

"Of course, your highness."
"Sorry, your highness."

Kinshirou rolled his eyes to himself, and began to prepare for the day.

Soon he would go down to breakfast. His hands trembled slightly as he thought of what was to come, and he clenched them into fists, willing himself to remain calm.

Today, he and Atsushi - together with the king and queen - would have to act out the biggest charade in which he had ever partaken.

He hoped the people of the palace would be convinced, and dreaded how badly they would talk of Akoya once it was done. But this was necessary, for the sake of Epinard's safety and Perla's reputation. Most importantly, it was necessary for Atsushi's happiness. To gain the marriage they wished for.

By the time Atsushi arrived for breakfast, it was clear that the gossip had spread from the staff to their employers. He was greeted by any number of sympathetic looks by the various nobles seated around the table, and only the king and queen acknowledged him with the usual polite greeting.

Kinshirou entered the room shortly after him, greeting first the king and queen, and then Atsushi and the other guests with a quiet 'Good Morning'.

Atsushi could see that Kinshirou was nervous. He looked past people rather than make eye contact, and his gaze occasionally flitted to Akoya's empty seat, his grip tight on his knife and fork.

He was waiting for it to start.

Atsushi was waiting, too. All it would take was a word from another guest, a query as to Akoya's whereabouts. Akoya was highly conspicuous in his absence, especially in the wake of the rumours.

Pulling off his spectacles, Atsushi slipped a hand into his pocket, seeking the freshly-pressed handkerchief he'd placed there this morning. But as his fingers closed around it, he felt something else there, too. Something cool, and hard, and round.

Something that belonged on Kinshirou's hand.

Atsushi gulped, pushing the ring deeper into his pocket and taking his time in cleaning his spectacles. He had to choose the right moment. Everything was riding on this morning going to plan--on the curiosity of those he shared a table with.

Returning his spectacles to his face and his handkerchief to his pocket, Atsushi prodded at his food. He had no appetite for it today. He just wanted to get this meal over and done with.

Finally, the curiosity got too great for Duke Kurotori, who had been watching Atsushi ever since his arrival.

"Might I be so forward as to ask the whereabouts of his highness this morning? I hope he isn't unwell again. Such a beautiful face should never suffer the pallor of illness."

Kinshirou mentally rolled his eyes. Kurotori was shamefully dramatic sometimes. He glanced at Atsushi, who had hunched his shoulders at the mention of Akoya.

"I have heard nothing of him this morning..." The king spoke in a booming, authoritative tone, and
turned to his wife. "Have you, my dear?"

The queen shook her head. "Nothing, dear--Atsushi, surely you would know if Akoya is feeling under the weather?"

Atsushi snapped to attention, back straight and shoulders rigid as he stared at the queen with wide eyes.

Kinshirou raised his brows in alarm. He knew that look. That was the look Atsushi wore when he was scared. The look of a man unable to speak.

Staring at him, Kinshirou willed him to be strong.

"I..." Atsushi blinked, tears welling up unbidden as he struggled to speak the words he'd practised with Kinshirou last night. Everything was riding on his ability to say this, and here he was, struggling to utter even one syllable. "I..."

The queen leaned forward, her face the very image of concern. "Is something wrong, dear?"

Atsushi gulped, frowning. "F-forgive me," he managed, hating himself for needing to rely on another at a moment like this. How could he rule Epinard in future, if he couldn't even give a simple, practised speech?!

"Atsushi...?" Kinshirou uttered his name softly, gaze gentle as he looked across the table at him.

Atsushi took a deep breath, heart calming when he looked back. "Prince Akoya has forsaken me," he said. Tears slid down his face, and he fought back a sob. "He has forsaken me, and forsaken Epinard. The engagement is over."

The king frowned. "Surely he is merely having a tantrum!"

"He was serious, your majesty. I do not wish to speak ill of your son..." Atsushi shook his head. He really didn’t want to speak ill of him. Akoya was his friend.

"Pray continue," the king said, his gaze steady.

"He cast me from his rooms with a very clear declaration that he will not marry me. It appears that he has other interests, and now Epinard is no longer safe."

"Oh you poor dear," said the queen. She reached across the table, taking Atsushi's hand in her own. "My heart aches for you, Atsushi."

The king nodded, frowning. "Today, I am ashamed to call him my son. To think that he would do such a thing--! But you..." He eyed Atsushi, who looked back nervously. "I will always think of you like a son, Atsushi. Know that you are always welcome here."

At that moment, Kinshirou privately admired Akoya's parents. They played their roles to perfection, every inch the kindly monarchs concerned for their guests.

But there was no time to dwell on their talents. It was time for him to play his part, too.

"If you don't mind my asking, what do you intend to do about Epinard?" he asked, trying to appear curious.

Atsushi effected a wince, finally getting into the act. "As you know - as I'm sure you all know," he began looking around the table. "My being heir to Epinard's throne relies on my being wed before
my heretic sister. Her wedding date is set for the near future. I was to wed Akoya tomorrow. Without this wedding, she will claim the throne of Epinard as her own, along with her heretic priest. They will plunge the kingdom into civil war, will pit religions against each other..." he trailed off, shaking his head in genuine sadness for the fate that still threatened his kingdom. "I must be wed before her, else all is lost!"

"Well..." began Kurotori, sitting up a little. "If it's a groom you want..."

"Prince Kinshirou." Atsushi placed his hands atop the table and gazed at his lover. This was the hardest part of all, and he was shaking. He couldn't stop. But the moment their eyes met, he felt like he could breathe again. He knew it would be okay.

"Yes, Atsushi?" Kinshirou looked back, expression unreadable and calm.

"You know Epinard's situation. You know Epinard itself, and we have been close friends for many years. I know this is a lot to ask, and it's very sudden, but as my close friend and respected confidant, would you..." He paused, taking a breath and trying to steady himself. "Would you honour not only me, but the kingdom of Epinard, by becoming my...m-my husband?"

Kinshirou had turned pink during Atsushi's nervously-spoken proposal. He'd tried to remain calm, to fight back the blush, but this was a proposal he'd never dreamed he would hear. Listening to Atsushi run through it under his breath last night had been nothing compared to hearing it today, in front of everyone.

Clearing his throat, Kinshirou gave in to the urge to smile.

"Not only for the sake of Epinard, but for your sake, I accept," he replied, heart racing. "And happily so, for you have always been dear to me, Atsushi. It would be my honour to become wed to you."

There was a collective gasp from around the table, and an immediate round of applause. The princes shared a smile, and when Atsushi reached for his handkerchief and felt the ring there, it no longer unnerved him. It would soon be where it ought to be.

"Well then!" exclaimed the king. "My own son may have forsaken the traditions of his homeland, but it is clear you understand the importance of your kingdom, Atsushi! But time is of the essence, is it not? You need rings, wedding garb, all the makings of the ceremony and celebrations..."

The queen rested her hand on her husband's arm. "We have all those things going spare, don't we dear? A wedding set for tomorrow is wanting for a groom."

"And we have found one!" the king nodded in approval. "The wedding shall go ahead! Assuming it is not too soon for you boys, of course?" he looked to Kinshirou, expectant.

"As you said yourself, your majesty, time is of the essence. Tomorrow will not be too soon."

"Then tomorrow!" The king banged his fist on the table, jovial. "Send out declarations across the kingdom, and dispatch to Epinard and Aurum! The royal palace of Perla sends its congratulations to Prince Atsushi of Epinard, and Prince Kinshirou of Aurum, who we hold as dearly as our own, upon the happy occasion of their marriage!"

His aide, ever hovering nearby, bowed and immediately rushed from the room. All around them, people broke into excited uproar. Staff chattered and nobles shouted up and down the table to each other.

Atsushi closed his hand around the ring in his pocket, and slowly rose to his feet.
"If I may..." he said quietly.

The chatter didn't stop, and Atsushi faltered.

Fortunately the king was ready for this. He banged on the table again, and gave a shout.

"Hush! Prince Atsushi has something to say!"

Atsushi cleared his throat. "Thank you, your highness..."

The king smiled. "Go on, boy."

Atsushi held out his hand, slowly uncurling his fingers to reveal the engagement ring in his palm.

"Akoya returned this to me for sake of propriety," he said quietly, as the voices dulled down. "It is the possession of Perla, but if I may, for sake of propriety, borrow it for the duration of our engagement..."

"Keep it!" The king flapped his hand. "It is the least we can do after our son's abandonment of you. Later, you shall go to the treasury, and we shall find you suitable wedding rings. A gift, from Perla to your respective kingdoms."

"Thank you, your majesty. I'm truly humbled."

"Yes, yes. Now go to your fiancé and put it on his hand, as is proper. Please stand, Kinshirou. You know the traditions."

Kishirou stood, and when Atsushi rounded the table to kneel before him, he saw how close he was to tears.

But Kishirou hid it well, keeping his gaze tilted slightly upwards and a calm smile upon his lips.

Atsushi took Kishirou's hand, and slipped the ring onto his ring finger.

"You honour me," he murmured. He'd forgotten what he was meant to say, and so spoke from the heart instead. Bringing Kishirou's hand to his lips, he kissed his ring. "I promise to always ensure your happiness, Kishirou."

Kishirou gulped heavily, his fingers tightening around Atsushi's. "And I shall ensure yours," he whispered, afraid to speak any louder. His eyes blurred with the threat of tears, and he took a deep breath, willing them away before anyone noticed.

The queen noticed. Smiling, she wrapped her hand around the king's, and leaned into him. "Darling. Perhaps we ought to excuse the princes from the rest of the meal. It is unusual to become engaged and wed so quickly, and they surely have a lot to discuss before the wedding tomorrow."

"Ah yes, of course!" the king smiled. "Be gone, you two. Dadacha shall be ready to provide a second breakfast should you require it."

"Thank you, your majesty," the princes uttered in unison. They bowed, Kishirou squeezing his eyes shut to the tears, and then they made a hasty retreat, arm in arm—as was proper, for two who were betrothed.

They didn't make it as far as any of their private rooms. They didn't even reach the stairs before tears spilled over onto Kishirou's cheeks, and he let out a muffled sob.
"Atchan..."

Atsushi smiled, teary-eyed and unashamed. Pulling Kinshirou close, he kissed him, chastely. "I know," he whispered. "We're almost there."

Kinshirou grasped his hand, vision blurred as he pulled him along. He couldn't stop smiling, and his heart wouldn't stop pounding. This was really going to happen. They had the blessing of the king, the support of the palace, and tomorrow, they would be wed.

Reaching his rooms, he drew Atsushi inside and captured his lips in a searing, hungry kiss.

They no longer needed to be restrained, and as Atsushi nudged him towards the bedroom, Kinshirou was thankful his staff would not return until the evening.

He and Atsushi were not to be disturbed.

Ibushi breakfasted alone. The meal was brought in by one of the maids, who had simpered a little and turned a deep shade of red before scurrying out of the room.

It was a lonely breakfast, and Ibushi wished that Akoya was there to share it with. But it didn't seem polite to invite him to join him. Not when this palace was Akoya's home, and Ibushi himself was merely a guest. A guest still being watched, at that. Though there was nobody else in the room, Ibushi had a sneaking suspicion that if he should leave, someone would happen to find him, and join him.

Finishing up breakfast, he decided to confirm it. Doing so might keep his mind off last night's argument, at least.

Ibushi smoothed down his clothes, and stepped into the corridor.

There was nobody around.

Breathing a deep sigh, he turned in the direction of the stairs, and began walking.

"Ah, your highness!" The aide appeared out of nowhere, all smiles. "There you are. Enjoying the morning air, I hope?"

"I was thinking of taking a walk," Ibushi said, smiling back. The aide had confirmed his suspicions. The king was still keeping an eye on him.

"In that case, your highness, please come with me. I can show you to the tailor's, and we can prepare those new clothes that his highness requested for you."

Ibushi nodded, shoulders tensing. "Then by all means lead the way. And how is Prince Akoya this morning?"

The aide arched a brow. "I'm sure he's absolutely fine. He will call on you if he wishes to see you."

"Of course," Ibushi nodded again, thoughtful. If Akoya wanted to call on him...Wait, was this a ruse to keep them away from each other?

"Come along now. We'll go to the tailor. Then I'll show you to the cobbler, and we can provide you with some good quality boots."
Ibushi caught the aide's disdainful glance at his boots, and stopped in his tracks.

"On second thought, perhaps I'll wait in my rooms. In case Prince Akoya wishes to call on me. We still have much to discuss."

The aide smiled. "But of course, your highness. I shall arrange for the tailor and cobbler to visit you in your rooms."

"Thank you..." Ibushi turned around and walked back to his room, puzzled. His brief journey outside of his room had taught him that yes, he was being watched. But perhaps he wasn't being kept from Akoya.

In which case, why?

If the king didn't trust him to have free reign around his palace, why did he trust him around his son? ...Unless Akoya was being watched, too...

Why was the king watching them? What was he suspicious of?

Ibushi was very fast coming to realise that though he was technically freed, he was still far from gaining the king's trust.

Akoya knew Atsushi and Kinshirou's engagement was successful when his staff returned to clear away his breakfast things and looked at him in a different way to before.

He'd been prepared for the loss of respect, the gossip. But not from his staff. He'd thought they, at least, would be on his side no matter what.

Yet it seemed his rumoured deeds were too horrible. Undoubtedly the mere breaking of his engagement had already been blown out of proportion. Undoubtedly there were already rumours about the strange man, now boarded in the palace as a prince, who had first been sighted in Akoya's own rooms--in his bedroom, of all places.

Akoya sighed, staring into his mirror as he braided his hair. This was an ordinary mirror, nothing special about it. A plain frame, and reflective surface of silver-backed glass. It wasn't magic. It wouldn't talk to him, advise him, comfort him. He couldn't ask it of its past, or its life, or its opinions. He couldn't--

Letting out a growl of irritation, Akoya turned away from the mirror and finished the braid as he walked across the room.

Yesterday's disagreement with Ibushi still weighed in his mind, and he wanted to make it right.

Anyway, he wanted to see him. Be with him. Today, they'd go down to the dragon.

He hoped Ibushi would be impressed.

As he hurried along the corridors to Ibushi's new quarters, Akoya thought about what he was going to say. He wanted to apologise for yesterday. It wasn't as though he didn't understand Ibushi's position with regards magic. Ibushi's opinion was easy to understand, considering it was magic that had trapped him in a mirror for a century. Akoya didn't agree that magic was dangerous and should only be used as a last resort. He believed that magic was a tool that could be used to benefit many.
Of course it could be used to cause harm--but anything could cause harm, if the intent was there. A candle could set fires, a book could spread propaganda, a precious jewel could spark wars...

He frowned, shaking the thoughts from his head with a sense of queasiness. He didn't want to consider the evils of the world. Today was supposed to be a day of happiness. Kinshirou and Atsushi were to be engaged (were engaged, based on the gossip he overheard as he paced along the corridor). Tomorrow they would wed. This was no time to dwell on evils he had no power to change.

He had to focus on the things he could change, and that would begin with apologising to Ibushi.

Reaching Ibushi’s door, Akoya rapped on it sharply and stepped inside, drawing to an immediate halt when he set eyes on the scene before him.

Ibushi’s old-fashioned clothes, folded neatly over the chair. The pinned garments set aside on the table. And Ibushi, standing on a stool in the middle of the room, whilst the tailor crouched before him, armed with a measuring tape.

"Just a moment ple--Ah." Ibushi smiled sheepishly, colour rising in his cheeks.

Akoya immediately averted his gaze, face burning. "Uh. I assume you aren't ready to see the dragon..." he muttered.

"Are we nearly done, Mr Tailor?"

"Hold still please, your highness," mumbled the tailor, apparently unruffled by Akoya’s sudden arrival. "Just a few more measurements, and I'll be on my way."

Feigning a deep interest in the tapestry on the wall, Akoya cleared his throat.

"Tailor?"

"Yes, your highness?"

"Prince Ibushi requires underclothes."

The tailor let out a soft laugh. "I'm well aware of that, your highness."

Nodding, Akoya finally turned his back on the scene. "I'll be in my rooms, Ibushi. Please come to me when you're dressed. We have matters to discuss."

"It will be my pleasure."

There was a smile in Ibushi’s voice, and it only made Akoya’s face grow hotter. Pushing his shoulders higher, he strode from the room, pretending that he was as unruffled by Ibushi’s state of undress as the tailor.

Now, return to his room, send for some tea, and try to calm down before Ibushi called on him. He could not let what he'd just seen hamper his ability to look Ibushi in the eye. In the presence of others, especially, he had to behave as normal. Not as if he'd walked in on him like that and absolutely not that his initial urge had been to send the tailor away and drag Ibushi to the--No. He couldn't think about that!

Akoya rubbed his hands over his cheeks and heaved a deep sigh.

He had to focus: on the engagement, the wedding, apologising to Ibushi and showing him the
dragon.

He couldn't allow himself to get distracted with desires of a more private nature. They hadn't even kissed!

They hadn't even kissed. They hadn't had a single moment alone. It was like the whole world was conspiring to keep them apart.

Sighing heavily, Akoya pushed his way into his room.

"There you are! What the hell do you think you're doing?!

Grimacing, Akoya looked up at his new guests, meeting the indignant glare of the pink-haired man who had spoken.

"Ryuu..." Akoya swallowed, gaze swivelling to his cousin's much calmer consort. "Io, it's nice to see you again. How are things in Gaia?"

"Thriving as always," Io's eyes were serious. "We received your letter on our way here. The royal courier caught up with our coach."

"Oh."

"Yes," interrupted Ryuu, annoyed at his question being ignored. "So are you going to explain yourself or should we take all the rumours as the truth?!!"

Sinking into his chair, Akoya rested his chin in his hand. "It's not what it sounds like."

"You literally abdicated. What gives? I can't be heir to Vesta and Perla!"

"Ryuu..." Io murmured softly, the look of concentration on his face betraying deep thought. "The two kingdoms united would create a world superpower. The economic possibilities are incredible."

"It doesn't matter," Ryuu gulped. "I can't do it, Akoya. Why are you forsaking everything your life has been leading up to? Your right to the throne, your engagement to Prince Atsushi..."

"Enough, please," Akoya frowned, raising a hand to silence him. "It's a long and complicated story."

"Then you'd better start talking, because I'm really confused about what--"

Ryuu was cut off by a knock at the door.

"Enter," Akoya looked up to see who else had come to ruin his day. But his frown eased into a flushed-faced smile when he saw who it was, and he rose to greet him.

"Io, Ryuu," he said, ushering Ibushi forward. "This is Prince Ibushi of Argent."

"A pleasure to meet you, your highnesses," Ibushi uttered, bowing.

Io and Ryuu glanced at each other, then at Ibushi.

"...You...don't have to get down on one knee like that..." Ryuu said, perplexed. "Stand up already, it's weird."

"Forgive me," Ibushi rose, and found himself nudged toward Akoya's chair. He raised a brow at him, questioning: this wasn't a seat for a guest, and it was the only remaining seat in the room.
"Sit down, Ibushi," Akoya hissed, resting a hand on his arm.

Io eyed them. "You have more to tell us than we thought," he observed.

"Yes. A lot has happened. It all started when--"

Another knock at the door.

Akoya scowled. "Yes? Enter!"

The door opened and one of the king's aides appeared. The same one who had been there at dinner last night.

Akoya's scowl deepened. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Ah, I was looking for his highness Prince Ibushi," replied the aide, eyes flitting around the room and taking note of Ryuu and Io, at which point he bowed low. "I apologise for the intrusion, I was unaware that your highnesses were taking a meeting."

"Yes, we are taking a meeting," Akoya rested his hands on his hips. "So please hurry and deliver your message."

"Oh. I merely..."

Ibushi smiled pleasantly at the aide. "Is it important?" he inquired. "A message from his majesty, perhaps?"

The aide shook his head. "No... No, your highness, it was merely that the, um, the tailor..."

"Yes?" Ibushi's brows rose expectantly.

"Um. I'll handle it, if your highness allows me," stuttered the aide.

"Then please do."

"My pleasure, your highness."

The aide bowed and left the room.

Ibushi frowned and checked the corridor a few moments after the man had left. His shoulders relaxed when he saw the aide was gone, and he turned back to the others.

"Ibushi?" Akoya tilted his head. "He was lying, wasn't he?"

"I fear my movements are being monitored," Ibushi smiled ruefully. "Perhaps yours, too."

"That must be my father's doing. I knew it was too much to expect for him to let you wander freely! He suspects something rotten, but there's nothing! Ugh, I want to tell him exactly what I think about--"

"Akoya," Ibushi rested a hand on Akoya's shoulder, earning a soft sigh. "We must face this with patience and composure. His majesty is concerned, and we must accept that."

"I know. You're right," Akoya pouted, resting his hand over Ibushi's. "We need to find a way for you to gain his trust."
Ibushi smiled. "In that case, we ought to form a plan before his aide finds another reason to intrude."

Having been spectator for long enough, and feeling forgotten, Ryuu spoke up. "Alright so you two have some serious alchemy going on between you, and..." he looked at Io. "Apparently Akoya isn't a brat anymore?"

Io gave a shrug, contemplating the princes. "A lot really has happened, hasn't it?"

"Atsushi gave me a mirror which turned out to be a magical prison for Ibushi. I learnt magic to free him and discovered Atsushi and Kinshirou are in love with each other, so I ended the engagement, persuaded them to get engaged instead, and freed Ibushi from the mirror."

"With the intention of trading places with me," Ibushi reminded him, serious.

"Thanks to you, we're both here," Akoya smiled, and looked across at Ryuu and Io. "Oh, and there's a dragon in the cellar."

Io and Ryuu's expressions mirrored each other, and they spoke of complete puzzlement and disbelief.

"Magic?" Ryuu stared, freezing in place. "D-dragons?"

"But dragons are a fairy tale," Io pointed out, frowning. "Magic doesn't exist."

Akoya and Ibushi looked at each other. Use of magic was still a sore point.

"Do you mind if I...? It's safe..."

"Go ahead. Your talent is harmless."

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Akoya said, wanting to apologise whilst he could. "I understand why you feel that way."

"And I spoke out of line," Ibushi said softly. "Anything can cause harm if used by the wrong hands."

Akoya's eyes widened. "That's exactly what I think!"

"Uh? Guests sitting right here?" Ryuu piped up.

Ibushi chuckled. "Please forgive us, Prince Ryuu. Akoya, do show them your talent."

"Then I'll try something new..." Grinning, Akoya set his focus on Ryuu and began to murmur under his breath.

Ryuu blinked. "Why are you staring at me like tha--whoa! Wh-what...?" He flailed as he found himself circling the room, as if flying. "Uh, I'm getting kind of dizzy here..."

"Please set him down," Io said, getting to his feet. "He isn't a plaything."

"Magic," Ibushi said, smiling. "Though you should practise a gentle set-down if you're planning to levitate living beings."

"It's alright, I won't drop him," Akoya replied without losing focus. "Ryuu is my dear cousin, and he'll be king of Perla one day."

"You're serious about abdicating?" Ryuu wobbled midair, and let out a squeak of surprise when he found himself circling the room, as if flying. "Uh, I'm getting kind of dizzy here..."

"Please set him down," Io said, getting to his feet. "He isn't a plaything."
"I know that," Akoya concentrated, letting Ryuu sink slowly to the floor. "And I'm serious. I have other things to do. More important things."

"But I can't do it," Ryuu protested, heaving himself back into his chair. "I'm not ashamed to tell you I'm scared about what will happen when I have to rule Vesta. One kingdom is enough. I can't rule over two. I'm...I'm not cut out to be king."

"Ryu..." Concerned, Io turned to him. "You are."

"Of course you are!" Akoya stared. "You're popular the whole world over. You have the charisma it takes to charm people, and you've always been able to make people see things from your point of view."

"Yeah but I'm not smart or tactical or anything."

"Perhaps not, but Io is..."

Io looked at him in alarm. "W-what are you suggesting?!"

"That you plan your future together," Akoya smiled brightly. Their faces were comical, but the shy, nervous glances they shot each other made him feel warm inside. Io and Ryuu were meant for each other. Why shouldn't they make important plans? "Think about it," he said. "A union of Perla and Vesta would be strong. A union of the two with Gaia would--"

"Be an economic power greater than the world has ever seen," Io interjected. His expression turned thoughtful as his mind filled with facts and figures. "Every nation involved would benefit from such a unification. The people could live comfortably. Nobody would struggle. Our force would be mighty, and the economy would flourish, given that--"

"Io, stop!" Ryuu grasped his lover's hand, brow creased. He took a shaky breath. "I can't do this. I can rule Vesta if you're by my side, but two kingdoms? Three? Three is more than I can bear, even if we're in it together."

Io squeezed his hand, gaze full of regret. "Ryu, I'm sorry. I got carried away."

"If I might interrupt," Ibushi said calmly. "I think this is something you all need time to think about."

"Yes," agreed Akoya. "Think about it, Ryu! You'd be the most popular and beloved king in the world!"

"Akoya, you need to think about it too," Ibushi reminded him. "You don't need to abdicate for our plans to go ahead."

Ryu perked up at that. "You have plans?"

Io eyed them. "It's definitely time to hear the full story."

As it turned out, the king's statement about getting wedding rings from the treasury hadn't been for show.

After lunch, Kinshirou and Atsushi were ushered there on the king's orders, and now sat in cushioned chairs at a desk whilst the palace jeweller and consulted thoughtfully with the treasurer. Most of the jargon they used was beyond Atsushi's understanding, but Kinshirou seemed to
"A simple metal band is more than enough," Kinshirou said, interrupting them. "Simplicity is the tradition for both Epinard and Aurum."

Atsushi nodded, relieved that Kinshirou had spoken up. "His majesty is kind to provide our wedding rings, but it would be crude to take advantage of his jewels."

"Nonsense! You must have jewels." The queen approached, and an aide appeared with a chair for her. She smiled at the princes as she seated herself. "Now then, I admire your humility, but you are princes. Princes need jewels—and jewels can still be simple and understated."

"Your majesty..." Atsushi started to protest, remembering (with some dread) how pushy she'd been about the arrangements for his wedding to Akoya. All those arrangements still stood for his wedding to Kinshirou, and none of it was simple.

"No need to be humble now, Atsushi," the queen smiled, and clapped her hands decisively. "Emeralds!" She looked at the treasurer and jeweller, who stood awaiting her orders. "Golden bands, inlaid with emeralds. They must look subtle. Simple, without being basic. I'm certain we have something like that."

"I'll check the records, your majesty." The treasurer consulted his ledger, paging through it.

Atsushi glanced at Kinshirou, who smiled faintly and took his hand. Things were already out of their control, but at least the queen wasn't insisting on the sort of chunky, ostentatious gemstones that the jeweller had been suggesting. It was a surprise, considering how outlandish the queen herself liked her jewels to be.

After a few moments of scanning through his ledger, the treasurer nodded to himself. "We have a few options, your majesty."

"Then bring them all out," replied the queen. "My husband gives his full permission for our friends to choose for themselves."

"Yes, your majesty."

Kinshirou and Atsushi shared another glance. It was clear enough that their choice was to be made from limited options. But it didn't matter. It was better to remain in the king's good favour.

The treasurer disappeared into the vaults, returning a few moments later with a cushioned tray, which he set down on the desk.

Upon it sat a number of rings that matched the queen's description of 'gold with emeralds'. Most of them were ugly, an assortment of chunky gemstones and old-fashioned styles.

But one design stood out from the rest, and it was the only design of which there were two identical rings.

The queen smiled. "Well, I think the choice is obvious, but it's up to you two. Which would you like?"

"Um..." Atsushi's gaze flitted from the rings, to Kinshirou, and back again.

Kinshirou smiled, signalling to the pair of rings. They were simple gold bands, inlaid with a thin line of tiny gemstones. From a distance, the rings would look plain, but close up, they sparkled. "These
are perfect, your majesty," he said softly.

Nodding approvingly, the queen signalled to the jeweller. "Can you adjust the fit by tomorrow?"

The jeweller stepped forward and sized the rings with his measuring tool. "If I work through the night, they will be ready by morning."

"Perfect," the queen beamed, rising from her seat. "These rings belonged to my great-great-grandfather. A gift from the Duke of Rosenquarz, I believe. It was the fashion at the time to wear identical rings on each hand," she chuckled. "I'm happy they shall see the light of day once more."

The princes rose, bowing to her.

"Thank you, your majesty," Kinshirou murmured sincerely.

Atsushi smiled, starting to get teary-eyed. "Epinard is indebted to Perla for its kindness."

"We all find kinship in our humanity," the queen uttered, straightening to full height. She smiled. "Now hurry along. I hear my son is going to show off his dragon, and I know you're curious."

They took their leave, and as they strolled down the corridor, Kinshirou linked arms with Atsushi and smiled at him.

"You're getting teary over rings. What will you be like at the ceremony?"

"Crying like a baby, I suspect," Atsushi replied sheepishly.

"That's my Atchan."

"I'm absolutely your Atchan."

Pulling him aside, Atsushi cupped Kinshirou's chin and pressed a longing kiss to his lips. It was a little improper, but there was nobody around to see.

Yet tomorrow, they would kiss before a congregation of people from all across the kingdom, if not the world—a kiss to forever seal the terms of their marriage.

"What do you mean we can't go in without escort?!"

Akoya stood before the guard, hands on his hips and a look of incredulity on his face. It was already late afternoon, and what was meant to have been a private trip into the cellars with Ibushi had turned into a group trip with Ibushi, Ryuu, Io, and also Kinshirou and Atsushi, who had tagged along at the last minute. Zundar had thoughtfully brought out old clothes for them all, and Akoya already felt on edge enough in these brown, somewhat raggedy old clothes, without having to deal with guards and stupid rules. The guards had smirked at him the moment he approached. They had muttered to each other too quietly for him to hear, but he knew their comments had not been kind.

Then they'd told him the group weren't allowed into the cellars without an escort.

The older of the guards gave a toothy smile. "His majesty says none's to enter without an escort of guards, on account of the dangerous ceiling."

Akoya stepped closer, a determined smile forming on his lips. To his pleasure, the guard took a step back, eye twitching nervously. "I trust that you, being one of the palace's most esteemed guards, will
be able to provide us with the required escort?"

"Of course, your highness, we'll arrange an escort for you immediately," the guard jabbered, taken
aback by his behaviour. He nudged the guard beside him. "Go on. Two of 'em should do. Tell 'em to
hurry up. Their highnesses haven't got all day."

"Y-yessir!" the younger guard saluted, relief passing over his face when he realised he wouldn't have
to go into the cellars. He bowed to the princes and hurried off.

"I'm grateful for your efficiency," Akoya's smile was tight. He hated to be kept waiting, and hadn't
anticipated this delay. His father certainly made things needlessly difficult. But that wasn't the guard's
fault, even if the man lacked respect and had obviously been gossiping about him. Setting his gaze
on the guard, he tilted his head. "You're an asset to the palace. It may seem that hanging around
outside an old door in the library is a redundant task, but it is important access is controlled. You're
doing an excellent job of it."

The guard puffed himself up a little, trying to shield his surprise. "Uh. Thank you, your highness. It's
a pleasure..." he glanced towards the others and lowered his voice. "And might I say I think it's a
travesty that so many of my fellows have been spreading rumours about your highness. I for one
think you're extremely noble, and surely have your reasons for your actions."

"Oh really?" Shoulders tensing, Akoya forced himself to maintain his smile. "Thank you for your
support. I can see that I can rely on you." (To turn on me if I took my eye off you for one moment,' he added mentally).

"Of course you can, your highness! You're our future king, and I am the king's guard!"

Akoya's shoulders tensed further, and his smile became tighter. Off to the side, Kinshirou frowned. It
was obvious this guard was a two-faced liar, yet Akoya was still talking with him as if he was the
most heroic of people. That was surprising. He'd expected his friend to start throwing accusations,
not words of praise.

Impatient of waiting, he cast an eye around their group. Io had plucked a book from the shelf and
was flicking through it in interest, whilst Ryuu had more or less draped himself around his shoulders.
He might have looked a nuisance, if not for the way Io's head tilted against Ryuu's, and the soft
murmur of their discussion about the book as Ryuu reached out and turned the page.

Kinshirou felt a stab of envy. He and Atsushi couldn't show any real affection in public, not yet. The
closest they could get was to walk arm in arm, which was proper for an engaged couple. After all he
and Atsushi had been through, all they had done, it felt cold to walk arm in arm, like strangers in an
arranged marriage.

His gaze flickered back to Akoya. Was this how he'd felt, when he was engaged to Atsushi? Had it
felt this distant and cold to walk together with him? Granted, he hadn't wanted to marry Atsushi,
hadn't wanted to push him up against a wall and kiss him, or sneak his hands inside Atsushi's robes...

Softly clearing his throat, Kinshirou tried to think of other things. It was sinful to think these thoughts
in public, when he couldn't act upon them. The ideas would be right there again if he dared look at
Atsushi, so his attention fell on Ibushi instead. Ibushi was the most unknown factor of the group. A
prince who appeared out of nowhere, with a mind-blowing story that Kinshirou wouldn't believe, if
not for all the logical evidence. He was yet to become properly acquainted with Ibushi, but so far his
impressions had been positive. Ibushi was honest and noble, chivalrous--if a little old fashioned.
Kinshirou's first impression was that Ibushi could become a good friend.
Somewhere at the edge of his attention, Akoya made a comment and the guard started stuttering in reply. Ibushi's lips twitched as if he was trying not to smile, and he looked at Akoya, gaze full of amusement and fondness.

Kinshirou found himself smiling. He'd privately questioned how this newcomer felt about his best friend, but no longer had any doubts. Ibushi didn't know he was being watched, so he didn't need to act. The affection in his eyes was genuine, and that made Kinshirou happy.

Today was turning out to be a great day, even if he couldn't hold Atsushi's hand.

He was awoken from his thoughts by a gentle touch to his arm, and a soft murmur of his name.

"Kinchan?"

"Hm? Yes, Atchan?"

"What are you smiling at?" Atsushi spoke quietly, and smiled as he asked.

Kinshirou inclined his head towards Akoya and Ibushi. "Them," he said.

Atsushi's smile softened. "I see. It's good, isn't it?"

"Yes," Kinshirou considered the open - perhaps almost brazen - way in which Ibushi was looking at his friend. Then he reached out and took Atsushi's hand. They were engaged. It wasn't proper, but it should be accepted, even if the palace did think the marriage was one of convenience rather than love.

Atsushi immediately flushed red. "Kinchan..."

Kinshirou smiled, adjusting his grip to entwine their fingers. "This is good too, isn't it?"

"Yes..."

It seemed Akoya was running out of ways to politely make the guard uncomfortable, and the conversation was turning awkward. Fortunately for the guard, their escort arrived swiftly, and the group was finally led down into the cellars.

The passageway was cleaner than it had been last time Akoya had been down here. The old torches had been replaced by modern lanterns, and footsteps and voices echoed against the walls as people went back and forth with boxes and chests of scrolls and books and miscellaneous objects discovered down there.

Since the king had seen the library cellars with his own eyes, the palace staff had been hard at work making it cleaner and more accessible. They'd already cleared most of the rubble from where the ceiling had caved in, and builders were already working to replace the fallen stonework. The tunnel beyond the cave-in was already being explored, and multiple store rooms had been found, each one full of writings and objects that had lain untouched for more than a century. Akoya was desperate to take a look at what was there, but had too many other things to focus on. Things that were more important than a bunch of mouldering scrolls and books that might not even contain magic.

He stole a glance at Ibushi. In the light of the lanterns, Ibushi's face seemed to glow with some sort of unearthly, magical energy. It was only a trick of the light, but it was an effect Akoya could appreciate. No doubt after all his time in the mirror, Ibushi's entire being had become infused with
magic. Either way, he was a sight to behold. He'd be an even nicer sight to hold, if only they were alone.

Akoya sighed, and felt a hand on his shoulder. Ibushi smiled and squeezed gently, and Akoya smiled back, nodding. They didn't need to exchange words for him to understand that Ibushi felt the same way—and was telling him to have patience.

But his patience was running out. He'd enjoyed a scant few moments in Ibushi's arms and it had felt wonderful. He wanted more.

Ibushi kept his hand on Akoya's shoulder as they continued through the passage. It was improper, but he didn't care. The guards probably wouldn't notice in this dim light, so the king wouldn't get to hear about it. Ibushi rubbed lightly with his fingertips. He could see the stress in Akoya's form, and wanted no more than to ease it away.

Alright, so he wanted a lot more than to ease his stress. Those other desires were simply not an option for them at present. Not unless he wanted to scandalise the entire group and probably make Akoya mad at him. It was hard to resist those urges. After so long unable to even touch him, it was all he wanted to do.

Considering the look in Akoya's eyes, he wanted that too.

Somewhere behind, Ryuu let out a little squeak of alarm. "Did anyone hear that?!" he asked. "Something went bang! Is the ceiling caving in again?!"

"More likely somebody dropped something," Io replied, smiling in the dim light. Ryuu was clinging to his arm like his life depended on it. He had to admire him for his sense of adventure. If there was one thing Ryuu hated, it was confined spaces, like these narrow corridors. Ryuu also hated darkness and gloom, places where firelight threw otherworldly shadows in unexpected places. This entire expedition was everything Ryuu hated, but he was doing it anyway because he wanted to see a dragon. Which in itself was admirable.

Io had a very clear memory of Ryuu once laughing as he confessed that as a boy, he'd been terrified by stories of dragons. Io had laughed with him, and confided in him that the only thing he'd even been afraid of was being alone. Ryuu had smiled then, and told him that he'd never be alone again, because he would always be there with him.

Ryuu had kissed him after that statement. It had been their first kiss.

Io smiled, and brushed his lips against Ryuu's temple as they continued through the passageway.

"What was that for?" Ryuu mumbled, clinging tighter.

"You're amazing," Io whispered back.

"You're more amazing. I'm just a prince too weak to become king."

"You're not weak. You're brave."

"I'm a coward. Hanging on to you here like some...cowardly person."

Io glanced behind and in front, noting that none of the others were paying them any attention. Then he tilted Ryuu's chin and kissed him quickly. "You're facing three of yours fears just by being here. That's bravery. A kingly quality."
"I can only do it because you're here with me."

"And I'll always be with you, Ryuu."

"Io..." Ryuu squeezed his arm and sighed. "Can't believe my dumb cousin is right."

"Right about what?"

"We should start thinking about the future."

Io rested a hand over Ryuu's. "We'll talk about it once we're back home," he promised softly.

Ryuu's head rested against Io's shoulder. "Always love it when you talk about Gaia like it's our home."

"It is, isn't it?" Io smiled.

"...yeah," Ryuu pressed closer, smiling to himself. Thinking of the future wasn't nearly so scary when he considered that his future had Io in it.

And just like the doorway at the end of the passage, the future would be bright.

Atsushi squinted as they approached, and tugged on Kinshirou's hand.

"We're nearly there, I think," Kinshirou told him. But his attention wasn't really on what lay ahead of the group, it was on Io and Ryuu, who were behaving far too intimately in front of everyone. It was shameful to hold each other like that in public! Such closeness was best kept for private moments! If they had to have contact with each other, couldn't they just--

"I'm jealous too, Kinchan," Atsushi mumbled, a sheepish smile on his face. He'd seen the way his fiancé scowled at the other princes. Knowing Kinshirou as he did, he understood why. He felt why.

"I'm not..." Kinshirou protested, guilty that it was a lie. But he wouldn't admit it here.

Atsushi kissed his knuckles, then his engagement ring. "Tomorrow is when it all changes for the better. Not long now."

Kinshirou nodded and held Atsushi's hand a little tighter. "Tomorrow can't come soon enough."

Akoya called the group to a stop before they could step through the doorway. He now stood there, silhouetted in light, hands on his hips. As he smiled at the group, his eyes sparkled in excitement.

"Are you all ready?" he asked.

"Yes," Ibushi nodded eagerly. "Please lead the way, Akoya."

"Ryuu? Io? And Kinshirou--Atsushi? Are you ready?" Akoya looked expectantly at the others, smiling wider when they nodded. He was enjoying this. Even though he'd wanted this just for Ibushi and himself, he couldn't wait to see his friends reactions when they came face to face with the dragon.

Or the reactions of the guards, for that matter. He hoped they would be afraid.

"Alright then," he said. "Let's go ahead. Just remember: it can't hurt you."
"I know that," Ryuu mumbled as the group proceeded forward. But he still clung to Io's arm a little tighter.

Akoya walked into the main room with his back straight and his head held high, and smiled proudly at the majestic form of the dragon. Its scales were caked in dust and grime, its eyes were milky, and it was dead, but it was still his dragon. He'd discovered it himself, with no help from anybody, and now he was able to show off the spoils of his adventures to people who, just like anyone, hadn't entirely believed in it—and likely hadn't believed in him.

Except Ibushi, at least. Of course Ibushi believed in dragons. Ibushi had never questioned whether he'd really found one. He'd always believed, always had faith.

"Gods, it's real!" Ryuu gasped.

Grinning, Akoya sauntered closer to the dragon, leaving the others to absorb what they were seeing.

Ryuu was still clinging to Io, who was reassuringly stable compared to how shaky Ryuu felt himself. As a child, he'd had nightmares about dragons. It was only repeated confirmations that 'Dragons Don't Exist' that had helped him get over them. To see one for real suddenly made those nightmares much more justified.

Except it was dead. All dragons were dead. Therefore dragons didn't exist—at least, they didn't exist alive.

Ryuu let out a sigh, and slowly relaxed his grip on Io's arm.

"Are you alright?" Io asked, looking away from the dragon. His eyes were full of concern, and Ryuu's fears began to melt away.

"I'm alright, yeah," he nodded, hand slipping down Io's arm to link fingers with him. "It's...kind of amazing, isn't it? I wonder if Gaia has any dead dragons lurking in its cellars?"

"Guarding the treasury, perhaps?" Io grinned. "A bit too fairytale for the fine scientists of Gaia."

"This whole thing is like a fairytale, isn't it? A prince trapped in a magic mirror, a dragon in a cellar..." Ryuu was finally starting to feel at ease. This vast room was well-lit, the dragon was no threat, and there were plenty of people about. This could easily be the grand hall of any palace, if not for the lack of windows.

Io arched a brow at Ryuu. "If this is a fairytale, there would be a wicked witch, and siblings, the youngest of which would triumph..."

Ryuu raised his brow. "But there was a witch, who imprisoned Ibushi in the mirror. And isn't Atsushi the youngest sibling...? I don't know about you, but I'd say marrying the love of your life is a pretty big triumph."

Io blinked, processing this. "You're right," he said, a sudden fluttering in his chest. "And you read far too many fairy tales..." Biting his lip, Io looked thoughtfully at the dragon.

"And...?" Ryuu asked, sensing there was more to come.

"We need to go somewhere and talk. Now."

"But we only just got here, wh--"
"Now," Io insisted. Looking across the room, he caught the attention of one of their escorts. "Prince Ryuu and I need to return to our quarters, immediately."

The guard had been staring in bewilderment at the dragon, and his relief at being able to leave was written all over his face. "Of course your highness. I shall escort you back immediately."

Akoya pouted at the exchange. "Already? Don't you want to see the rest? The hidden room? Everything beyond?"

"We've some things to discuss," Io replied, a pink flush rising in his cheeks. "Matters relating to the future," he added more quietly.

"I'd like to see the hidden room," Kinshirou interjected. Staring at the dragon was giving him a headache. After all his schooling in science, it was difficult to accept that he was standing before one of the very things science denied. The dragon's presence was evidence that there was so much more to be learnt about the world. So much that science hadn't discovered, or was too busy denying to learn the truth of.

"I'd like to see it, too," Atsushi nodded, his gaze still upon the dragon. It was dead, but there was something incredibly alive about it. Something in that white gaze...

Akoya looked from Io and Ryuu to Kinshirou and Atsushi, an idea forming. "Alright," he nodded. "Ryuu, Io, if you wish to return then by all means do. The rest of us can proceed to the other rooms in a moment. I want to look at the dragon a while longer, as I've had little time to really appreciate it--unless you'd like to go right away?" He arched a brow at Kinshirou, willing him to get the message.

Kinshirou raised his brows back, then frowned slightly and cleared his throat. "Atsushi and I can find our way on our own, I'm sure," he stated, as Io and Ryuu were led back down the passageway.

The remaining guard looked at him uncertainly. "Pardon me, your highness, but his majesty stated explicitly that all parties must have an escort. Owing to the unstable ceiling, you see..."

"Then you can escort us," Kinshirou told him.

"I'm sorry, your highness, but I must also remain at his highness' side," the guard looked to Akoya, who smiled at him.

"Don't worry about that, please!" Akoya said encouragingly. "I'll remain here until your return. There are plenty of other guards nearby," he signalled to the pair who guarded the tunnel entrance, and those beyond, handling carts of rubble. "It's perfectly safe."

The guard seemed to consider this. A discomforted glance at the dragon, and he nodded. "Of course, your highness. I shall do as requested."

"Then please lead the way," Kinshirou said. "I'm impatient to see this hidden room. Prince Akoya and Prince Ibushi will be safe here."

"...Yes, I'm eager to see it, too," said Atsushi, catching on to the reason behind Kinshirou's sudden impatience.

Nodding, the guard motioned towards the tunnel. "Then please follow me. Watch your footing in the tunnel, your highnesses. The floor is uneven."

As they walked away, Akoya turned back to the dragon in order to hide his smile. Kinshirou had understood his intention, and the guard hadn't suspected a thing.
Ibushi stepped up beside him. "That was cunning," he stated, a smirk upon his lips. "I'm impressed."

"I was hoping you'd be impressed by the dragon," Akoya replied, glancing at him with a smile.

"That too," Ibushi turned to him and grinned. "You do know it's only dormant, don't you?"

"Dormant?!" Akoya stared at him, then shook his head and stared at the dragon instead.

It looked dead. Was it really alive?

Panic rose in his heart. What had he done by leading so many people down here, within reach of its talons, its teeth, its fire breath?!

"...How can you tell?"

Ibushi's hand came to rest on his shoulder, reassuring as ever.

"Think about it," he murmured. "You said these cellars have been closed for a century, since the cave-in. If it had died, it would not be in this condition."

Akoya's brows rose as he comprehended what Ibushi was saying. If the dragon had died down here, it would have turned to dust by now. Instead, it was merely covered in dust, with rats living in the shadows between its front paws.

"Why is it dormant?" he asked, attention focused on the shadows. The rats had abandoned the area the moment they arrived, and the shadows were empty. Big enough for a man. For two men...

Beside him, Ibushi shrugged. "Magic, I suspect. Likely the same curse that was placed upon Argent. This poor creature is trapped in unnatural slumber until that curse is broken."

"We'll break it somehow."

Ibushi smiled, warmth in his chest when he looked at him. "You are rather good with curses."

Tearing his gaze from the shadows, Akoya smiled at him fondly. "And you're rather good with me, Ibushi."

"What's that supposed to mean, hm?" Ibushi tilted his head, smile turning playful.

Akoya glanced past him, counting five guards within eyesight, all too far away to see anything, and only one of them paying them any notice.

"Let's examine the dragon closer," he said, loud enough for the guards to overhear. The guard watching yawned. Another glanced their way, then continued with his work. Akoya grinned and took Ibushi by the hand, tugging him towards the shadows.

Ibushi followed, footsteps light against the flagstones as he was tugged out of view. "What--"

Akoya's lips found his the instant they were in the shadows.

Shrouded in darkness, concealed by the dragon's huge, dusty legs, Ibushi pulled him into his arms and kissed back. Heat coursed through his body, his heart pounding as Akoya's fingers slid into his hair and his kiss became deeper, hungrier, needier. Ibushi held him tighter and kissed back twice as hungrily, so many weeks of wanting to do so melting away in the wake of lips that tasted of tea and macarons. He heard Akoya's breath hitch and smiled, holding him closer, close enough that he could feel the rapid pounding of Akoya's heart.
Akoya sighed softly as they parted, his hands sliding from Ibushi's hair in favour of embracing him. "I've wanted to do that for far too long," he whispered.

"The feeling is beyond mutual," Ibushi reassured him. He rubbed his back lightly, noticing the way Akoya's heart thudded beneath his hand, how it seemed to beat in unison with his own. "I love you," he uttered.

"I love you too," Akoya smiled brightly, and leaned in to claim another kiss.

As their lips met once more, a strange rumbling came from overhead.

They pulled apart as dust began to rain down around them, decades of grime falling away from iridescent green scales.

Sneezing in the dust, Akoya looked about in alarm as the rumbling became louder.

"Surely the ceiling isn't falling in?!" He stepped out from the shadows to peer upwards, and movement caught his eye. Frowning, he walked further across the room, squinting up at the dragon's jaw.

Was it the flickering of the lanterns, or did it just move?

Suddenly hit by the realisation of what was happening, Ibushi ran towards him, eyes wide.

"It's waking up!" he shouted, pulse racing.

Several paces from the dragon now, Akoya looked up to find once-milky eyes had turned golden--and were swivelling to stare at him.

Air rushed around him as the dragon inhaled, and a soft roar sounded from its belly.

"Akoya!"

Ibushi tackled him to the ground as fire spurted forth from the dragon's jaws, and heat engulfed them.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The presence of a live dragon in the palace cellar promises some tricky problems, but as tensions rise a new level of understanding is reached between some of the princes--and the king himself.

Whilst Ryuu struggles with his fears and Io faces fears of his own, Atsushi and Kinshirou say their last goodnight as unmarried men.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I actually didn't realise it had been so long since I posted anything!
I concussed myself at the weekend so haven't been working on this at all //sobs
Fortunately I'm a couple of chapters ahead, so can share this one already!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cellar was in uproar. As guards rushed into the chamber, the dragon let out another belch of smoke, causing shouts of horror and bewilderment from all around.

Akoya grunted, body aching from the way he'd hit the floor. He was sure they should both be dead, but he was definitely still alive. There was the discomfort of the flagstones against his back, the feeling of dirt against his skin, the weight pressing him to the ground, and heat, so much heat...

And there was a telltale rushing around them, a glimmering blur of Ibushi's defence magic. The prince in question was pressed close against him, one hand raised and a look of concentration on his face as he kept the magical shield in place.

"Are you hurt?" Ibushi asked, keeping his gaze on the dragon.

Letting out a shaky sigh, Akoya circled his arms around Ibushi's waist. "I'm fine. What happened? Why did it wake up--What can we do about it?"

Somewhere beyond the dragon, Kinshirou could be heard barking orders at the guards to stay in formation if they wanted to live.

Ibushi frowned. "They mustn't kill it!"

"What else can they do? We're trapped here..." Akoya peered past the shield, at the golden eyes of the dragon, and tried not to panic. The creature was beautiful, but deadly--and it looked as if it wanted them for dinner.

"I can control it," Ibushi's reply was full of determination. "I just need to get up off the floor."

"Then stand up!"

"If I do that, you won't be protected."
Akoya tightened his grip. "So I'll get up with you. I'm not helpless."

Ibushi looked at him then, tenderness in his gaze. "I know," he murmured. "Alright. We stand on three. One, two--"

They levitated from the floor before Ibushi reached 'three'. He raised a brow. "Akoya..."

"What? We're off the ground, aren't we? The rest is up to you, Ibushi."

"I was going to say you're more talented than I thought."

"Oh," Akoya smiled, irritation giving way to pride. Then panic set in again as he realised the dragon was about to let forth more fire. "Uh. The dragon..."

"Ahead of you there." Ibushi set his gaze on the dragon, and shouted out a command in a language Akoya didn't recognise.

The dragon drew a deeper breath, belly rumbling ferociously.

Ibushi yelled the command again, and abruptly the dragon turned its head, fire belching out into an empty corner of the room.

"Good girl!" Ibushi grinned. "Alright, it's safe now. She understands."

"She?"

"Yes, she." The magical shield disappeared as Ibushi called out another command, more softly than before.

With a manner of obedience, the dragon laid down, watching as the princes floated gently to the floor.

"Nice set-down," Ibushi murmured.

"Thanks. I practised on Ryuu," Akoya grinned. "Nice dragon-handling."

"Thanks," Ibushi smiled. "I've been doing it since I was six."

Before Akoya could reply, guards raced up to them. "Your highnesses! We thought you'd been killed! Please step away from the dragon. We'll destroy it at once!"

Ibushi scowled. "Nobody is killing this creature!"

"It is dangerous, and poses a threat to the kingdom!"

"The only danger here is foolish minds who can't see the potential that stands before them!" Ibushi snapped. "If you intend to kill this dragon, you will have to get through me."

"Well your highness, with respect, his majesty says--"

"Never mind what my father says," Akoya replied, standing tall beside Ibushi. "This dragon is my property. Prince Ibushi knows the ways in handling dragons, as you have seen with your own eyes. It is no threat. It is an asset to our kingdom: the only known dragon alive!"

"But his majesty..."
"I agree," Kinshirou interjected from behind. His face was pale, his expression stern. "I agree with his highness. This dragon is valuable. It should not be killed when it has done no harm."

"It tried to kill Perla's heir!" exclaimed the guard. "His majesty said to protect Prince Akoya at all costs, from any who may harm him! And the dragon belched forth such fire that--"

"She sneezed!" Ibushi exclaimed. "Had she truly wanted to cause harm, we would all be dead." He eyed the guard. "She is a domesticated dragon, bred for riding. I can work with her as easily as you might work with a horse."

"A sneeze?!" the guard raised his brows. "What--"

Akoya opened his mouth to cut in, and promptly sneezed instead.

"The dust, idiot!" he muttered, plucking a handkerchief from his pocket and patting at his nose. He raised his voice, speaking clearly across the room. "Listen, all of you. If any harm comes to this dragon, I will make sure that my father punishes the perpetrators. Severely. She is mine, and as long as Ibushi is here in the palace to command her, she is safe."

Atsushi stepped forth, wiping dust from his spectacles. "It's lucky Prince Ibushi was here," he said. "I think, as the only person alive who knows anything about dragons, we all ought to listen to him." He looked at Ibushi and smiled. "How should we proceed, your highness?"

Anger faded from Ibushi's face, and he gave Atsushi a grateful look. "We need to work on getting this girl out of here," he said, patting the dragon's nose. The creature snorted softly and closed her eyes. "A cellar is no place for a dragon."

"Then she needs somewhere to stay," Akoya pointed out. The dragon was of considerable size, and the palace stables, with their wooden doors and piles of hay, were definitely not suitable for a dragon.

"She will be alright outside, whilst the weather is warm," Ibushi said.

"Getting the dragon out is the most important factor," Kinshirou decided, looking towards the tunnel. "I assume she came in that way. Can she go out that way?"

"The tunnel isn't cleared yet, your highness," said one of the guards. "And the exit to the outside has been bricked up."

"Then we'll need a team of builders to demolish the brickwork and make stable the tunnel mouth," Kinshirou decided, looking at Akoya. "Would his majesty allow that?"

Akoya smiled tightly, and nodded. "Father will be happy so long as the dragon is out of his palace."

"Then let's begin..." Kinshirou paused, looking at the dragon as he weighed up the situation. "Prince Ibushi, will the dragon hold her fire from now on? And not attack?"

"She never attacked in the first place," Ibushi scowled.

"I'm merely asking a question."

"Yes, she will hold her fire. I asked her to mind it doesn't hurt anybody. As for attacking, the only reason a trained dragon will lash out is if she is attacked first." Ibushi looked pointedly at the guards.

"As would anyone," Akoya agreed, hands on his hips. "So all of you can forget any ideas about
hurting my dragon. We are going to get her out of this dusty old cellar."

"Yes your highness." The guard who appeared to be in charge bowed.

"Well then?" Akoya inclined his head, brow raising. "Prince Kinshirou has a plan that he needs you to carry out. If you'd continue your work clearing the tunnel, I can have the builders summoned to open that entrance."

Noticing that the guards were all looking worriedly at the dragon, Atsushi cleared his throat. "I fully believe this dragon isn't dangerous," he stated.

"It's alright to touch her isn't it, Ibushi?" Akoya asked quietly.

"Of course. Come here and pat her nose, like you would a horse."

A little wide-eyed, Akoya stepped closer. "She's much bigger than a horse..."

Ibushi laughed softly. "She's magnificent. Here." He demonstrated how to stroke the dragon's nose, and smiled when she let out a soft, warm-breathed sigh. "See, she's relaxed."

Akoya rested a hand tentatively on the dragon's snout, marvelling at the gentle warmth that emanated from her, not at all like the scorching heat he expected. He ran his hand carefully over her scales, smiling.

"See?" he said to the others. "She's like a cute dog. Atsushi, come pat her. You want to, don't you?"

"Um..." Atsushi smiled sheepishly and edged closer. "She's pretty big..."

"I'm right beside you, Atchan," Kinshirou murmured, stepping up next to him. As they, too, patted the dragon's nose, the guards appeared to relax.

"So she is safe," marvelled one of them. Akoya recognised him as the one who had half-heartedly watched Ibushi and himself earlier. "And it's thanks to Prince Ibushi!"

Akoya grinned. He liked this guard. "Prince Ibushi is the foremost authority on dragons," he said, clapping his hand onto Ibushi's shoulder. "If not for his quick-thinking and defence magic, we might not have been able to meet this understanding with my dragon."

"Of course, your highness!"

"If not for your magic, we would never have got off the floor," Ibushi reminded him, smiling. "That was an impressive feat, for something you hadn't practised."

Akoya flushed from the praise. "Not as impressive as you saving my life, Ibushi."

"That's right!" exclaimed the friendly guard. He turned to his colleagues. "I saw it with my own eyes--Prince Ibushi saved Prince Akoya from certain death!"

"I saw it too," agreed another, as others nodded and murmured amongst themselves in agreement.

"I'm glad you all saw what happened," Akoya stated. "You can confirm these happenings to my father. He will want to know all about my dragon's awakening, and Ibushi's skill with controlling her--his saving my life! Ibushi and I will go to speak to him immediately!"

Behind him, the dragon let out a series of soft, rumbly noises.
Ibushi cleared his throat. "I'd rather remain here a while," he said quietly. "Just to make sure Agneya feels safe and comfortable."

"Agneya?"

"The dragon. Her name is Agneya."

"You named her already?! But--"

"She told me her name," Ibushi smiled and touched his shoulder, lowering his voice. "You're strong enough to handle your father alone. He values you more than he lets on."

"...Right." Akoya took a deep breath and straightened his back. "Alright," he said, loud enough for the others to hear. "I'll go to father. Who would like to escort me back?"

"I'll stay to oversee things here," Kinshirou stated, casting a glance over the guards. Most of them hadn't gone back to work yet, and though the majority seemed agreeable to the fact the dragon would do no harm, it would only take one or two fools to incite trouble.

"I'll stay too," Atsushi offered. He'd stuck close to Kinshirou ever since petting the dragon, and his hands trembled slightly.

Kinshirou shook his head. "Please go and take some rest," he urged him. "Tomorrow is our wedding. We both need time to reflect upon our vows before the ceremony."

Atsushi adjusted his spectacles, frowning slightly. Was Kinshirou trying to keep him safe, as if he were helpless and unable to fight? But he couldn't go and leave Kinshirou down here if there was potential danger!

"You need some time for yourself, don't you?" Kinshirou continued, taking Atsushi's hands and squeezing gently. "Time to be calm and still."

"Oh." Atsushi understood now. Kinshirou knew he was nervous. That's why he wanted to send him away. "Yes, I do," he sighed.

"Then please go, Atchan, and know that it is safe down here." Kinshirou made a show of kissing the back of Atsushi's hand. It was perhaps a little improper, considering they weren't yet wed, but they would be wed soon, and holding back affection was proving to be difficult.

"Great, then Atsushi and I shall return to the palace," Akoya cut in, before Atsushi could argue further. "Let's go."

A couple of guards took up lanterns, and the princes departed.

Kinshirou turned to Ibushi the moment they were gone. "So," he said. "Tell me about dragons."

Ibushi smiled and patted Agneya's nose. "Where would you like me to start?"

An unspoken tension had formed between Io and Ryuu on their way back to their room. Though they talked amiably with the guard who escorted them out of the cellars, they fell quiet the moment they entered the main halls of the palace.

Upon reaching the privacy of their rooms, Ryuu let go of Io's arm and let out a sigh.
"Gonna change," he said, already pulling off the musty old shirt Zundar had found for him as he went towards the bedroom.

"Good idea," Io replied quietly. Though he appreciated the loan of the old clothes, as they prevented his own from getting dirty, it would be nice to get into something better fitting--not to mention something that didn't smell as if it had come out of the cellars to begin with.

Shirt removed and old breeches cast aside with it, Ryuu stood in his undergarments and considered his choice of clothes. He already knew what he wanted to wear, but looking into the wardrobe gave him an excuse not to look at Io. If he looked at Io, he was sure his heart would explode from the pressure. He'd not experienced such a breathless, heart-thumping, gut-twisting feeling since the first time he and Io had made love. That was some time ago, and the feeling had become unfamiliar.

Ryuu gulped. He knew why Io had wanted to return to their quarters, and it had been a long time coming, lurking in the back of his mind: a fear and a dream all at once.

Ryuu wanted it. He wanted it so much. But like being heir to the throne, he wasn't sure if he was ready. What if he messed up?

Biting his lip, Ryuu continued to stare into the wardrobe.

Having pulled off the borrowed clothes, Io paused and studied Ryuu. Warmth flooded his chest when he saw the seriousness in his eyes, the pink that coloured his cheeks.

Io understood that Ryuu was scared. Ryuu always avoided looking him in the eye when he was afraid of something.

But this had always been in their future, hadn't it? And Ryuu had no reason to be scared.

Io smiled faintly and crossed the room, reaching for his hand. "Ryuu?"

"Hm?" Ryuu let himself appear busy contemplating his shirts, but his fingers still curled a little tighter around Io's.

"Come here a moment." Io led him to the bed, and they sat down side by side.

Ryuu's gaze shifted to the floor. "What is it, Io?"

"I..." Io shook his head. "There's no right or wrong way of saying this. I don't even need to pause to calculate the economic or political outcomes, because I've calculated those a million times. But I can't put words together like you can, Ryuu, so this is going to sound...clumsy."

Ryuu shook his head, face reddening. "Just say it like you, Io. You're never clumsy."

"Well then, I--This isn't right."

"What?" Ryuu looked up in surprise, catching the way Io frowned. "What's wrong?"

Io cleared his throat, heat rising in his cheeks. "I shouldn't just be sitting here like this. I...One moment. Stay there."

Ryuu looked on as Io got to his feet. Worry tugged at his heart when he saw the way Io began to pace the room, the way his hands rested on his hips as he took slow, deep breaths.

Io was anxious. He only ever looked like this in moments of uncertainty. In moments of fear.
Ryuu understood, then. Io was scared too. They were both in the same position, on the precipice of something wonderful, both equally hesitant to take that next step forward.

"Io?" he spoke softly, holding out a hand to him.

"Ryuu..." Io turned, swift footsteps bearing him back across to the bed, where he dropped down on one knee before him.

Ryuu's breath caught in his throat at the tenderness in Io's gaze, the apprehension in his smile, and when Io clasped his hand all thought of anything else was lost. There was only him, and Io, and *this was it.*

"Marry me, Ryuu."

Ryuu stared.

Io sighed, chest aching for the wide-eyed alarm he saw in Ryuu's face.

"Io, I--"

"You'll never be alone. I'll always be there for you, whether you're the heir to one kingdom, or two, or none at all. If marriage is too much, I won't hate you for saying no. I'll always be at your side, Ryuu. I love you."

Heat pulsed through Ryuu's heart in wake of the words and he leaned forward, lips brushing against Io's forehead. "I could never say no to you, Io," he whispered. "But let's keep this to ourselves, until we're home. It's probably improper to announce an engagement right before someone else's wedding."

Io's heart leapt. "We'll keep it between us," he promised, beaming. "You...you really want to do this, don't you..."

Ryuu smiled. The bubble of tension in his chest had burst, giving way to an excited, fluttery sensation. "You're the only one for me, Io," he said. "It's kind of scary to think about, but it was only a matter of time, wasn't it..." He looked down at himself and let out a laugh. "I can't believe we just got engaged in our undergarments."

"It's rather improper," Io agreed. A smirk formed on his face as he leaned up, hands snaking around Ryuu's waist. "But it's convenient."

"Convenient?" Ryuu arched a brow, comprehension flooding his expression when Io leaned in and pressed a kiss to his bare chest. "Oh. *Convenient."

Grinning, Ryuu scooted back on the bed, pulling Io with him.

They were alone, and they had happy news, and were in an extremely good position to celebrate.

Under Kinshirou's watchful eye, guards and builders alike were already working on the entrance to the tunnel. It had been a few hours since the work began, and Ibushi had spent most of it imparting firm rules to those who had been sent in to watch over Agneya. Eventually he was satisfied that they understood the dragon-speak to communicate with her, and consented to returning to the palace.

Together with Kinshirou, he returned to the library.
"There he is!"

The king's shout came the moment Ibushi stepped from the cellar, causing him to start.

But the exclamation was followed by applause, and he looked up to see the king with a number of his subjects, careful smiles upon their faces as they applauded.

Just behind the king, Akoya beamed at him. "If not for Prince Ibushi, we would all have perished!" he said loudly.

"It's true," agreed Kinshirou, reaching the top of the cellar stairs. "Prince Ibushi saved Prince Akoya's life, and if not for him this entire palace may have been razed to the ground." He smiled, clapping Ibushi on the shoulder. "We're lucky to have the world's only dragon expert in our midst."

"A true man of the hour," announced the king, motioning Ibushi forth. "Off you go, my boy. You'll want to clean up after your adventures. Akoya! Make sure our guest has everything he needs."

"Of course, father!" Akoya grinned, pretending he didn't notice the suspicious glances of the nobles around him. He turned to Ibushi and gave him a polite smile. "I'm at your service, Prince Ibushi."

Ibushi's posture was somewhat awkward as he adopted Perla's modern manner of bowing, and he smiled back. "And I am at yours."

They left the library, and Akoya had no doubt the gossip among the nobles would resume the moment his father was out of earshot.

Kinshirou hung back as the king's subjects trailed off. The king was lingering amongst the shelves without really looking at the books there, and something in Kinshirou's gut told him to wait.

"Kinshirou. The king spoke quietly once nobody else was in earshot.

"Yes, your majesty?"

"You've spent enough time in Prince Ibushi's presence to form an opinion. Is he genuine? Was what happened down there real, or another trick of...magic?"

The king sounded weary as he asked his questions. Kinshirou took a step closer and examined the books, not wanting anyone to take interest in their conversation.

"I believe he's genuine, your majesty," he replied. "I don't doubt his knowledge of dragons, or of magic. But I saw with my own eyes that he saved your son, and took control of the dragon. There's no scientific answer for anything that happened, but we all saw it."

"As I thought," the king sighed. "I fear we'll never know how that dragon awoke."

"Prince Ibushi was puzzled about it himself. We spent some time discussing the matter."

"Did you reach any conclusion?"

Kinshirou shook his head. "Nothing for certain."

"But you believe this Prince Ibushi to be genuine--to be who he says he is?"

"Yes, your majesty."
"Thank you, my boy." The king's back straightened and he fixed Kinshirou with a firm gaze. "I believe you'll want to clean up before dinner?"

"Your majesty." Taking this as a sign to leave, Kinshirou bowed and returned to his rooms.

After such a hectic day, the hour or so before dinner was peaceful. Akoya had accompanied Ibushi back to his rooms with the intention of spending that time together with him, only to find the tailor waiting. Not wanting a repeat of this morning, he left Ibushi in the tailor's capable hands, and promised to meet with him on the way to dinner.

Having time on his hands, he retired to his rooms and settled into his favourite chair with a book he'd taken from the library. The encounter with the dragon had made him realise how little he really knew about magic. He had to change that. Ibushi may have saved him today, but he needed to learn to look after himself.

But the events of the day had made him tired, too, and before long the words began to blur, his eyelids drooping and his head starting to nod.

He didn't realise he'd fallen asleep until he awoke to a hand gently cupping his cheek, and soft lips being pressed to his own.

Breath hitching and heart thumping in surprise, Akoya opened his eyes a crack to see the face of his assailant. Yet he let them slide closed again when he saw it was Ibushi, and he smiled against his lips, hands lifting from his long-abandoned book to slide around his shoulders.

"That was a pleasant way to wake up..." He murmured, resting his forehead against Ibushi's and holding him there, eyes still closed.

"I wouldn't want to wake you unpleasantly," Ibushi smiled, gently running his fingers through Akoya's hair.

"Missed waking up to you."

"I miss it too. Being there when you awaken."

"Better that you're free, now..." Akoya's eyes fluttered open, and he pulled back a little, remembering how his father's aide had still been snooping around this morning. "We're alone?" he realised.

"Completely alone," Ibushi smiled. "Zundar let me in. He was going to wake you, but I assured him I could do so myself, and would escort you to dinner. So he's gone. And I wasn't followed here."

"Father trusts you now," Akoya's gaze grew brighter. "He was impressed by you today."

Ibushi's gaze turned playful. "Would he still be impressed if he knew I had intentions towards his only son?"

"Depends what those intentions towards him might be..."

"Well, I definitely want to kiss him," Ibushi dropped a chaste kiss on Akoya's lips. "And I want to hold him, and kidnap him to go on an adventure."

Akoya laughed. "It isn't kidnapping if I choose to come along."

"Then we're going on an adventure to dinner, because Zundar was rather agitated at your being
"asleep," Ibushi smiled fondly. "And before any bigger adventures, I want to teach you some defence magic."

"I thought you were against my learning magic?"

"Not after today. You can handle it, and you need defence magic in your repertoire as much as anything else."

Filled with smugness, Akoya grinned. "Then I'll look forward to your tutoring me. But first, dinner."

When Ibushi stepped back and offered him a hand, Akoya finally took note of what he was wearing.

"Finally, you have something modern to wear," he stated, getting to his feet and running his fingers over the deep green brocade of Ibushi's frock coat. "Our tailor outdid himself. You look splendid, Ibushi. It will be even better once you have proper, modern boots and all the other accoutrements."

"I'm sure you'll tell Mr Tailor exactly what I need," Ibushi chuckled.

"You'll have everything necessary to a modern prince. I'll make sure of it..." Akoya stopped by the mirror to run a brush through his hair.

"I'll be the prince you want then, will I?" A teasing smile formed on Ibushi's face.

Catching sight of his smiling reflection in the mirror, Akoya was hit by a wave of nostalgia. It wasn't so long ago that the mirror was the only way they could see each other, and now here they were, in the same world, the same room, able to talk, to touch...

Setting down the brush, he turned and pulled Ibushi into a tight embrace.

"You're already the prince I want," he uttered, a sudden pressure in his chest, as if he'd burst at any moment. It hurt, made him feel breathless, made him want to hold on and not let go, to forget about dinner, about tomorrow, about anything that was to come. Life as he knew it had been turned upside down months ago with Atsushi's arrival, and though life now was better than life before, he felt as if he hadn't stopped for a moment.

But he had no time to stop yet. There was the wedding tomorrow, and there was a dragon to think about, and Ibushi's kingdom to save. Resting had to wait.

Ibushi wrapped his arms around him, rocking gently. Akoya's expression said a lot more than his words did: he was exhausted, and barely maintaining a grip on his composure.

"I want you, too," he murmured softly. He dropped a kiss into the soft strands of Akoya's hair. "Would you prefer to eat in private tonight?" he asked. "That can be arranged, can't it?"

Akoya drew a deep breath and pulled back, absently swiping a hand over his eyes. "Yes, but we must be present," he said, straightening his back. There was a smile on his face now, but it was artificial, practised for the sake of his image. "Father expects everybody to be there."

"Then we mustn't disappoint him."

"No, we mustn't." Opening the door, Akoya offered Ibushi his arm, and together they stepped into the corridor.

Freshly bathed and dressed for dinner, Io entered the room to find Ryuu sitting at the window,
staring out across the grounds. He had a pensive expression on his face, and was so lost in thought that he didn't hear him approach.

"Ryuu?" Io spoke quietly, not wanting to alarm him, but concerned about his expression. Whatever was on Ryuu's mind, he wanted to deal with it sooner rather than later. "Everything alright?"

"Mm," Ryuu lifted his head. "You look nice, Io."

Io kissed his forehead. "You too. Something on your mind?"

"Actually, yes. Do you know what you look like?" Ryuu was smiling now, an energetic sparkle in his gaze.

Io tilted his head, unable to help smiling back. "What do I look like, Ryuu?"

"Husband material."

"Oh, really," Io laughed. "That's good to hear. I was worried you might be having second thoughts already."

Ryuu stood up, hands resting on Io's hips as he leaned in for a kiss. "I've never had second thoughts about you," he murmured.

"You were brooding until I disturbed you."

"A little, maybe."

"So what's on your mind?"

"Same old, same old. Sorry, Io. It's not going to get better just because I went into a cellar and looked at a dead dragon."

Suppressing a sigh, Io reached up and ran his fingers through Ryuu's hair, brushing back the unruly strands that fell into his face. "It's alright," he said quietly. "You're decades away from becoming king. That's a lot of time to learn what you think you need. You're brave, Ryuu, and you proved that today. You prove it a lot. It's fine if you think you're not ready. You don't need to be..." He gave a slightly uncertain smile. "I don't think anyone feels ready when they come to the throne."

"Io..." Ryuu let his head drop against Io's shoulder, his hands sneaking inside the back of his frock coat as he embraced him. "It's a good thing we're engaged, because I could never even think about being heir to Vesta if you weren't with me."

"And I'd be lonely without you." Io tilted his head against Ryuu's and rubbed his back in slow circles. "I'll always be by your side, Ryuu."

"Heh. That's good, because there's no way I'm ever going to leave you." Pulling back, Ryuu looked into Io's eyes and smiled. "You always know how to make my heart sing, Io. I love you."

"I love you too," Io smiled back. "Ready to go to dinner?"

"Do I get a kiss first?"

"Of course."
The dinner table was crowded that evening, with many changes to the usual seating arrangement. Being newly engaged, Kinshirou and Atsushi had been seated together, with Io and Ryuu seated opposite them. Akoya was in his usual seat near his father, and was irritated to find Ibushi had been given a place across the table, rather than beside him. But Ibushi appeared content enough, making polite conversation with the queen to his right, and Kinshirou and Atsushi to his left.

The table was also host to two more newcomers: Atsushi's cousins En and Yumoto, respectively the Dukes of Cerulean and Scarlet, who had arrived just in time for dinner. There was a murmur around the table about a third newcomer to the castle, who had arrived with them, but Akoya considered it baseless gossip—if there had been a third person, they would be here!

En and Yumoto's presence was another irritation. En still looked slovenly despite being better dressed than the last time Akoya had seen him, and Yumoto's voice carried noisily all the way up the table, drowning out all other conversation. It really was hard to believe they were related to Atsushi, who was so kind and selfless and soft-spoken.

Then again, he didn't really know them. Atsushi had been happy to see them, so they must have some merit. Ibushi would tell him he ought to give them a chance before making judgement on them.

Akoya glanced across the table and smiled slightly. Ibushi was talking with Kinshirou as if they'd known each other for years. It was a pleasant sight, something that warmed him from within. Until that moment, he'd never realised how important it was for his love and his friends to get along, and he was glad they'd found some form of common ground.

Atsushi had found it exciting to sit at the table beside his fiancé. It was different to before, when he'd been stuck behind Akoya, and practically able to feel his displeasure. This time, his fiancé was a far better match—was somebody he truly loved, in a romantic sense. It felt wonderful to sit there, very much in view of everyone else, and know that everybody knew he and Kinshirou were to be married. Atsushi had never considered himself to be a particularly proud person, but he was proud to be engaged to Kinshirou. They could truly make each other happy, and with Kinshirou at his side, Epinard's future was safe.

Dinner was over all too soon, and Atsushi could hear people talking of the wedding as they left from the room. He smiled, squeezing Kinshirou's hand.

"This time tomorrow, we'll be married," he said softly. "The news should arrive in Epinard by the time we finish the ceremony."

Kinshirou smiled. "Word should reach Aurum tomorrow morning. Our kingdoms shall rejoice."

"The rejoicing of my heart will be greater, Kinchan."

"I hope it is always so."

"It will be..."

They wandered slowly through the palace, arm in arm, until they reached the stairs up to Kinshirou's rooms.

Kinshirou let out a sigh. "Curse traditions..."

"I know," Atsushi drew him close. "I like to honour traditions, but to spend the night apart feels cruel."
"It is expected, under his majesty's roof."

"And it's only tonight. We'll see each other tomorrow, and then we never need spend the night apart again."

Kinshirou's cheeks flushed, and his arms tightened around Atsushi's waist. "Next time we see each other, it will be to say our wedding vows, Atchan," he murmured.

Nodding, Atsushi glanced up and down the corridor, and cupped Kinshirou's chin. "Then we should make this goodnight kiss a memorable one, shouldn't we?"

Their kiss was slow and unhurried, and any that happened by averted their gaze, tiptoeing onwards so as not to disturb the couple. For the love between them was evident, in the flush of Kinshirou's cheeks, in the tender way in which Atsushi held him, in the way they parted for breath and sighed before their lips met again, tender and longing.

When the two finally came to part, it was heavy-hearted and full of longing. A kiss like that was certainly memorable, but it made parting even harder, and both princes slept that night with a distinct impression of how wrong it felt to not have the other at their side.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: THE WEDDING

finally
Morning came, and the palace was even more a hive of activity than usual. Maids rushed back and forth with decorations and tableware and freshly laundered clothes, aides attended to their respective masters, and the palace was alive with excited chatter.

The wedding ceremony could not come fast enough. At the same time, it was approaching far too soon, and Atsushi felt breathless just thinking about it.

He breakfasted alone, picking at the food served in his room. After a while he gave up on eating in favour of sipping tea. Then he bathed, and let his staff take control of his hair and his clothing as they prepared him for the wedding ceremony. His staff talked with him as they worked, but his responses were automatic, distracted.

Conversation soon fell quiet.

In the wake of the silence, Atsushi became lost in thought. He repeated his vows to himself, over and over in fear that he might make a mistake. He didn't want to appear a fool in front of everybody. He didn't want to ruin what should be a perfect moment. He--

He sorely wanted to see Kinshirou. Kinshirou would know the right things to say to calm him down.

But they were following tradition. He wouldn't see him until the ceremony.

The thought only wound his nerves up tighter.

As Kinshirou stood in his room being fussed over by his staff, he smiled and talked pleasantly with them, making sure to emphasize his gratitude to the king for allowing the wedding to take place in the palace. Such words always got back to the king, and the man had been surprisingly agreeable to the marriage. Kinshirou wasn't completely sure what had changed his mind, but he wasn't going to question it. That could wait until he and Atsushi were married, and safely in Epinard.

Assuming there were no last-minute hiccups before the ceremony, at least.

Kinshirou swallowed, and smiled a little wider as he listened to the chatter of his maids. Though he was doing his best to appear calm and collected, he was intently focused on not tapping his foot, on
not pacing up and down. He had to stand still and let his hair be combed, and let the tailor make last minute adjustments to his robes and add the final details.

So there he stood, still as a statue, bearing the trivial conversation with grace. His vows lingered in the back of his mind, repeated to himself so often that he could recite them in his sleep. Just as well, for there was no time to practise them aloud: the tailor had scarce completed the final adjustments when Priest Wombat's assistant knocked at the door.

It was time.

The palace chapel was filled with voices. Nobles had travelled from all over the land to witness the marriage ceremony, though several guests hadn't heard the news of the change in groom until they arrived—the diplomats from Epinard among them.

As the host of the wedding, the king had fielded their questions and demands with courtesy and calmness, and assured them that his only involvement in this change of plan was to ensure a wedding still went ahead.

The congregation talked as they waited, conversations turning to recent gossip. Their words echoed off the painted ceilings and ornately-carved rafters, condescending and harsh. Many pairs of eyes rested accusingly upon Perla's prince, and on the stranger beside him, and murmurs grew louder: Did he have no shame? Why did he look so happy? Who was that at his side? Was he the reason for the prince's betrayal?!

Ibushi watched from the corner of his eye as the unkind words continued. He could see that Akoya smiled with gritted teeth, that his gaze was downcast and his hands were clasped so tightly his knuckles had turned white. Akoya's jaw clenched harder and his brow twitched as if he were fighting a frown. He was close to losing his temper. Ibushi wanted to reach out to him, to whisper calm words and glare at all those who hurt him with their ignorance. But he could do nothing here, and that in itself caused a hot fire of frustration to flare in the pit of his stomach.

Suddenly the musicians began to play a soft, mellow tune, and all mouths fell silent as everyone turned to watch the princes make their entrance.

Kinshirou was at ease as he waited to enter the chapel, his earlier nervousness erased by certainty. This was really happening. He was going to marry Atsushi, and nothing could go wrong.

The attendant waited for the right moment in the music, then held the door open and waved him through. Kinshirou gave her a grateful nod and stepped into the chapel, breaking into a smile when he saw Atsushi walk through the door opposite.

Atsushi looked incredible. Though he was wearing identical robes to Kinshirou, they looked completely different on him, highlighting his strong shoulders and firm chest and slender waist. Atsushi's hair shone, and he smiled brightly the moment he looked at him.

They met at the end of the aisle and Kinshirou took his hands, eyes blurring with tears. "You look wonderful, Atchan," he whispered.

"You too, Kinchan," Atsushi whispered back. Conscious of the number of people looking at them, he blushed. "Let's get married."
Arms in arm, the pair began the walk down the aisle to the front of the chapel, where Priest Wombat awaited them.

The priest smiled as they reached him, then cleared his throat and began the ceremony.

"We, the free people of the great kingdom of Perla and her most honourable friends, are gathered here on this beautiful day, in this beautiful chapel, to witness the union of His Highness Prince Kinshirou Kusatsu of Aurum, and His Highness Prince Atsushi Kinugawa of Epinard, who now join their hands before me..."

On cue, Atsushi and Kinshirou turned to teach other, smiling as they linked hands.
"For today we are here to celebrate love!" cried Wombat, getting into the swing of the ceremony.
"Fortunate are the loved, for love is the greatest power on this earth!"

Sensing that the priest was about to launch into one of his lectures on the subject, Kinshirou fought a grin and squeezed Atsushi's hands.

Atsushi squeezed back, his smile broadening. Today, such a lecture was fitting. After dreading the thought of marriage for so long, it had turned out to be a true reason to be happy, a marriage for the sake of love. There was nobody but Kinshirou that he wanted to be standing here with, and the thought made his stomach feel as if it were full of hot, sticky honey. His eyes welled up with tears of happiness.

This was really happening.

They were getting married.

Nothing would stop them now.

Amidst the congregation, Ryuu hugged Io's arm and rested his head heavily on his shoulder, his eyelids drooping. Io smiled faintly and placed a hand over Ryuu's, stroking gently with his thumb. It wasn't the sermon that made Ryuu tired, but the lack of sleep. They'd learned about the dragon during dinner last night, and the news had given Ryuu nightmares. Now he was exhausted, and Io wasn't sure how much of the day's festivities they would get through. Worried for his fiancé, he'd stayed awake long after Ryuu had finally gone to sleep, caressing his hair and watching for signs that the nightmares might have returned. Ryuu's slumber had eventually become peaceful, and Io had succumbed to tiredness shortly before dawn. Now, with Ryuu snuggled warmly against his side and Wombat droning on, Io was struggling to keep his eyes open.

As the sermon continued, Akoya watched his friends faces, a comfortable tingling in his chest as he saw the way they smiled at each other. Kinshirou and Atsushi were both close to tears, their gazes gentle and adoring. Seeing them together made all the stress and trouble of the past few weeks seem worth it. None of the unkind words from the congregation mattered, because this - Kinshirou and Atsushi, happy and in love and here to seal that love with a lifelong vow - was what mattered.

He could survive the unkind gossip. Given enough time, everyone would find something new to fixate on, and they'd leave him in peace.

"And now!" cried Wombat, causing the congregation to suddenly jerk out of their sermon-induced stupor. "I ask of you, if any know why these two should not wed, step forth and speak!"

Silence fell upon the chapel, and all Atsushi could hear was his heart pounding in his ears. He stared at Kinshirou, praying that nobody would speak up, that the delegates from home wouldn't protest at his marrying the 'wrong' prince, that the king wouldn't change his mind and call a halt to the
wedding.

But all remained silent, and the princes shared a smile of relief as Wombat continued.

"Then we have come to the most important part of the ceremony: your oath!" Wombat beamed. "Prince Kinshirou, if you would like to repeat after me: I, Prince Kinshirou Kusatsu of Aurum..."

Kinshirou's grip on Atsushi's hands tightened. "I, Prince Kinshirou Kusatsu of Aurum..."

"Take thee, Prince Atsushi Kinugawa of Epinard..."

"Take thee, Prince Atsushi Kinugawa of Epinard..."

Atsushi smiled as Kinshirou continued to follow Wombat's cues, heart pounding. They both knew these vows. They'd practised them obsessively.

"...under oath as witnessed by all present today, to be my lawful husband."

"Prince Atsushi, your turn," said Wombat, beginning the cues afresh.

"I, Prince Atsushi Kinugawa of Epinard, take thee, Prince Kinshirou Kusatsu of Aurum, under oath as witnessed by all present today, to be my lawful husband."

"Your happiness shall be my bread, your smile shall be my gold," Kinshirou said softly, not needing the prompt from the priest.

"My bread shall be your happiness, my gold shall be your smile," Atsushi beamed, suddenly wanting to laugh with happiness.

"Your honour shall be my purpose, your joy shall be my cause."

"My purpose shall be your honour, my cause shall be your joy."

"Your presence shall be my faith, your trust shall be my strength."

"My faith shall be your presence, my strength shall be your trust."

"Your love shall be my health, your heart shall be my home."

"My health shall be your love, my home shall be your heart."

Kinshirou smiled, warm tears sliding down his cheeks. "This oath decrees our bond."

"For in unity we are strong."

"This love shall never be broken."

"This love shall never be b-broken." Tears spilled over onto Atsushi's cheeks and he smiled, heart bursting with joy.

"And now the exchange of rings!" Wombat exclaimed.

The rings were brought forward by a beaming Yumoto and a sleepy-eyed En, and the congregation looked on as the final part of the ceremony took place.

"With this ring, our oath is made," Kinshirou's voice trembled as he placed the ring on Atsushi's finger. It was a perfect fit.
Taking up the other ring, Atsushi slipped it onto Kinshirou's hand. "With this ring, our bond is sealed," he replied unable to stop smiling.

Wombat nodded approvingly. "And so before the free people of the great kingdom of Perla and her most honourable friends, I bid you, Prince Kusatsu Kinshirou of Aurum, Prince Atsushi Kinugawa of Epinard, to seal your oath with a kiss."

Heat rose in Atsushi's cheeks, his heart thudding twice as hard. Then Kinshirou stepped forward and their lips met, and Atsushi forgot about all the people watching. His heart calmed, and he held Kinshirou gently as he kissed back.

The kiss didn't last nearly long enough, after being apart since yesterday evening, but when they separated, Kinshirou's smile was more than enough to make up for it. Besides, they had tonight. Their wedding night.

"I hereby pronounce you wed," Wombat announced. "Bound in thy love, 'til time eternal."

The priest began to applaud, a cue for the congregation to do the same.

As their applause floated up to the rafters, Atsushi couldn't stop himself from leaning in and kissing Kinshirou again.

They were married. What was once an impossible dream had become reality.

The wedding festivities were in full swing, and speeches were under way. Ryuu had valiantly stayed awake during the king's speech, but had started to doze against Io's shoulder as one of Epinard's diplomats gave his longwinded congratulations to the newlyweds. Io nudged him awake, eyes fixed on the man. They had to stay awake and alert for this. Then they could take their leave and get some sleep. Hopefully Ryuu would be tired enough that he'd sleep without having nightmares tonight.

Across the room, Ibushi's expression suggested a polite attentiveness as the diplomat continued his speech, but he was actually watching Akoya. Though the mean gossip had eased since the ceremony, there was still a low hum of unkind remarks beneath the happy chatter about the wedding, and he could see it was getting to him. If anything, he looked more stressed than he'd done before the ceremony.

Akoya could feel Ibushi's eyes on him, but didn't dare look back. A tight smile remained frozen on his lips, and his gaze was fixed on Kinshirou and Atsushi as he tried to ignore the mutterings nearby. He had to focus on his friends, on their happiness. Today was all about them, and no-one should be able to take away from that.

At the front of the room, Atsushi leaned over and murmured softly into Kinshirou's ear. Kinshirou's lips pursed slightly and his gaze swept the room, coming to rest on him.

Akoya looked away, a sudden squeezing sensation in his chest. Kinshirou's gaze had been stern, and it put him ill at ease.

Epinard's diplomat finished his speech, and after a smattering of polite applause, Atsushi rose to speak.

"I'm grateful to all of those who came here for the wedding today," he began.

"Look at him, so brave to go through with this," came a harsh mutter somewhere behind Akoya and
Ibushi. "Unlike our own selfish prince, Prince Atsushi knows about love and loyalty for his kingdom."

Akoya took a shaky breath. That was it. He couldn't stand another moment of this.

Throwing an apologetic smile towards Atsushi and Kinshirou, he rose from the table and slipped out of the room.

Atsushi frowned slightly at his friend's exit, and paused to look at Kinshirou, who nodded.

"Some of you may have been surprised by the change in plan, when you arrived," he continued, resting his hands on the table to hide that they were trembling. "A lot has happened since the announcement of my betrothal, and - with the approval of his majesty - I'd like to tell you the truth behind this change."

The king gave him a hard stare, but nodded. "I trust you to make it entertaining," he stated, his words more of a warning than an approval.

Atsushi knew he had to speak with care. "The truth is..." he took a deep breath, pausing when he saw Ibushi rise and sneak out. "...The truth is, I have long been a fool," he said. "A fool, for being too apathetic in the pursuit of love..."

Akoya hurried along the corridor, wanting to get as far away from the wedding party as possible. His eyes darted left and right, seeking out an empty room where he might find some peace and quiet, some kind of solace from everyone, where he might calm down and gather his thoughts. If he didn't, this tension inside would surely break him.

In a sudden flash of movement, a hooded figure swept past the end of the corridor, robes sweeping the floor and gait bearing them swiftly out of sight.

Fear clenched at Akoya's heart. Was this an intruder? In his home--on his friends' wedding day?!

Anger exploded forth, obliterating the fear. Anger at the ignorance of the palace residents, of the unkindness of the guests. Anger at his father for wanting to send him away, for not believing him, for not believing in him. Anger at himself, for how awful he'd been over the years, for bringing about so much heartache and trouble for those he cared about.

But Ibushi had taught him to channel that anger, to use it, and now he channelled it towards the hooded intruder.

How dare someone step into the palace uninvited? And with what deeds upon their mind?!

Snatching an old rapier from a display on the wall, Akoya gave chase.

Nobody would enter his home uninvited.

Nobody would ruin Kinshirou and Atsushi's special day.

Oblivious to what was going on outside of the room, Atsushi continued to explain to a wide-eyed part of guests.

"Just over a year ago, I was informed by my father that I was to marry Prince Akoya," he said. "I
accepted it as a necessity, understanding that I must be wed for the sake of my kingdom, and trusting that my father, and his majesty the King of Perla, would have discussed the matter in depth to ensure a good match."

"We did," agreed the king, nodding. "We certainly did."

"And I am grateful," Atsushi said, bowing to him. "For in Akoya, though I did not find love, I found a good friend."

"A friend who broke off the engagement at the last minute," somebody muttered from the crowd. Atsushi frowned. "The truth is," he continued. "Though this turn of events has robbed Perla of a marital union with Epinard, it has strengthened future relations between the two kingdoms. For I, as Epinard's future king, can place my trust wholeheartedly both in His Majesty and in Prince Akoya, to maintain, uh..." he trailed off, looking to Kinshirou for help.

"To maintain excellent trade and support between our kingdoms," Kinshirou finished for him, smiling. "Aurum, too, is indebted to Perla for its kindness and understanding."

"That's right," Atsushi smiled, placing a hand on Kinshirou's shoulder. "You've likely heard by now that on the event of Kinshirou and I's engagement, he professed a great fondness for me..."

Another murmur rose up from amongst the guests, some surprised and some understanding. Atsushi took a deep breath. "Our good friend Prince Akoya knew of it," he stated. "He discovered Kinshirou's feelings for me. What's more, he learned of...of my feelings for Kinshirou. My love for Kinshirou..."

The guests were in uproar, utterances of surprise, shock, approval and denial spilling forth. Atsushi looked at Kinshirou and smiled, heart fluttering and words suddenly failing him. He hadn't said nearly as much as he'd wanted. After seeing the look on Akoya's face today - and overhearing more than enough cruel comments - he'd wanted to put things right. But he wasn't nearly as good at speeches as Kinshirou was. He'd have to rely on him to finish this.

Kinshirou rose to his feet and cleared his throat to attract the room's attention. "Akoya broke off the engagement in hope that Atsushi would turn to me," he stated, looking out across the crowd with an expression that dared anybody to find fault. "He did that to the detriment of his honour and his reputation, potentially to the detriment of his own kingdom, because he places such great value on our friendship. He couldn't let himself stand in the way of true love, which he sees as pure and righteous." He was making some of this up, but it didn't matter. The people were transfixed, and what's more they were convinced. "For that, I am grateful, as it has led me to be standing here before you today, with the man I love at my side."

"Hear hear," cried the king. "And let it be known I would not have consented to the previous arrangement, had I been aware of your affections for each other. Perla and Epinard shall always be firm friends, whether unified by marriage or not."

"We are truly grateful, your majesty," Kinshirou bowed, Atsushi smiling and bowing beside him.

"Might I propose a toast," the king said, standing up and raising his glass. "To the Princes Kinshirou and Atsushi, and to the ongoing friendships between Epinard, Aurum and Perla!"

The guests cheered at that, and Kinshirou and Atsushi smiled at each other.
Nobody would ever dare argue with a king.

The intruder was in the library.

Akoya had snuck around a corner just in time to see the figure disappear inside, leaving the door ajar.

There would be nobody there today. The librarian was at the wedding, his assistants and the academics would be at dinner, and undoubtedly the guards were slacking off away from their duty, being that everyone was celebrating.

Eyes narrowed, Akoya strengthened his grip on the rapier and approached the door. His footsteps made little sound as he snuck into the room, but his heart pounded so hard he was sure it would give him away.

Yet the intruder didn't seem to notice him, too busy examining a table piled high with scrolls and books of magic.

Akoya held back, watching as the broad-shouldered figure searched through the pile. A scroll disappeared into the folds of the intruder's robes, and he scowled. He wouldn't let anyone steal knowledge from Perla, let alone magical knowledge.

Readying his rapier, he stepped forth.

"Put that back," he growled, voice low. "And then turn around very slowly. Thieves are not welcome here."

"I am no thief," came the deep-voiced reply. The intruder turned, face obscured by the hood.

Akoya waved the rapier. "I said put it back! That is property of Perla!"

"You have a lot of rage, Prince Gero, and it is misdirected."

"I'm warning you..." Akoya tried to step forward, but the intruder raised a hand and suddenly he couldn't move. "What--What magic is this?!!" he demanded.

"It's for your own good," replied the intruder. "I need you to listen, not attack me."

"You want to fight with magic? Fine." Akoya muttered the levitation spell, confused when the intruder remained firmly on the ground.

"That won't work with me, I'm afraid. Your magic is still unpractised and needs--" The intruder was cut off when a heavy book flew through the air, hitting him squarely in the chest and causing him to stumble backwards.

Akoya smirked. "You were saying?" he asked, levitating more books off the shelf. It took a lot of concentration to move multiple items at once, but he refused to let this man get the better of him.

"You need more practise," said the intruder. With a wave of his hand, the books fell to the floor.

"How did you--?!"

"Defence magic." Ibushi stepped forth, a scowl on his face. "Release him from your spell, or you'll regret it."
The intruder looked at him and let out a soft chuckle. "Do I need to trap you by the same means, Prince Arima? You were always one to listen to reason rather than attack without thought."

Ibushi's face filled with confusion. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Don't you remember me?" The intruder pulled back his hood, revealing short ginger hair, kind eyes and an even kinder smile.

Ibushi stared, unable to believe his eyes. "Prince Hakone of Scarlet?! How can this be true?!"

"A pleasure to see you alive and well, Prince Arima of Argent," the prince gave a nod, his gaze moving to Akoya. "Prince Gero, you may know me better as the Magician Gora."

Suddenly aware that he could move again, Akoya lowered his rapier and stared. The Magician Gora? The very man whose scrolls had helped him free Ibushi? What was he doing here?

How on earth was he still alive, much less looking not a day over twenty-five?!

Gora smiled, and drew out the scroll he'd taken from the table. "We three must talk. Time is no longer on our side."
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Whilst Atsushi worries about the sudden departure of his friends, Gora provides information with the potential to change the world—but with it comes conflict.

Chapter Notes

Expect some seriously dumb princes in this chapter.
Also some sleepy ones.

The speeches were done, the tables had been cleared, and now there was music and wine, and there was dancing, guests' vibrant robes creating swirls of colour across the floor of the great hall. In the middle, clothed in the pure white of their wedding garb, Kinshirou and Atsushi held each other close. To all who looked, they were the happiest couple alive.

Atsushi really did feel like they were the happiest couple alive, for there was no happiness greater than being able to create an eternal bond with one’s true love. Yet beneath the bubble of happiness there was a tight, stretched-out sensation in his chest, an undercurrent of uncertainty, of dread.

"You're thinking too hard," Kinshirou murmured, swinging him around as the music changed pace. "What's on your mind?"

Atsushi's glance swept around the room, noting who was there, who wasn't. "Our friends," he whispered back, just above the music. "And our return to Epinard. What if there's trouble?"

"We don't have to leave immediately, if you want to wait."

"Then let's rest a few days and spend some time with the others. I want to make sure everything will work out..."

They twirled, and Kinshirou kissed Atsushi's cheek. "Our friends will be fine."

"But they haven't returned yet."

"They're probably... You know. Like we did."

Atsushi flushed at the thought. "In the middle of our wedding?"

Kinshirou considered this. "It's unlikely, but possible."

"Do you think they're alright?"

"Akoya can take care of himself. Ibushi is capable too."

"...They probably *are* sneaking around..." Atsushi relaxed in his hold, pressing closer. "We would
Heart swelling with fondness, Kinshirou rested his chin on Atsushi's shoulder. "Lucky we no longer have to do that."

As the music changed to a slower beat, the pair smiled, their bodies moving gently in time.

Silence reigned within the library for several long minutes after Gora finished his explanation. The scroll was still rolled up in his hands, and he beheld the others with a patient, knowing smile, as if aware of how incredible his tale sounded.

Yet whilst Ibushi looked back with a hint of awe in his expression, Akoya's face soured into a scowl.

"You expect me to believe," he said, rising from the table where they sat. "Not only that you're the Magician Gora, who wrote many of the scrolls in our cellars, but that you saw the future and left a dragon beneath my family's palace, with no guarantee it wouldn't burn the place down, and then you willingly put yourself into enchanted slumber, to awaken only at a time when Ibushi's curse was broken?!"

"That's correct," Gora nodded. "Considering what you have lived through recently, I would think it very easy to believe."

"You and Ibushi were friends?"

"Prince Hakone was my mentor," Ibushi said quietly. "I learnt some of my best magic from him."

"Yet when I first used magic, you--ugh, I'm not getting into an argument over that again." Hands on his hips, Akoya glared at Gora. "You knew what would happen. You even knew how to break the curse. Yet you let everything turn out as it has. You let--"

"Akoya."

Ibushi's touch was usually soothing, but the hand on his arm only riled him up further. This was too much. After all the stress, the lies, the gossip, the hard work, it was too much.

"No, Ibushi," he growled. "Gora, if that really is your name, if you knew of the future, why did you let it happen? Why did you let your own student be imprisoned within a mirror for a hundred years?! And those hideous creatures who trapped him there--why did you not stop them?!" He was dangerously close to throwing a tantrum now, his voice rising in anger. "If you're such a powerful magician, why didn't you stop everything from happening? You could have saved Ibushi! You could have saved Argent! Instead you let evil have its way, and Ibushi was trapped alone for so long! Have you any idea how it feels to be alone?! To be trapped in one place, and have no control over your own life?! And Argent is still hidden, trapped, forgotten! The world has changed its course, all because of your apathy in doing what was right!"

Gora fixed him with a calm stare. "Are you finished, Prince Gero?"

With a growl of annoyance, Akoya slumped back into his seat. "Do you have an answer for me, Magician Gora? You even forsook your own kingdom and let it be absorbed by Epinard..." Akoya shook his head, frowning. "When I found your writings, I thought you a paragon of virtue and intelligence. Yet you're no better than the ones who imprisoned Ibushi."

Frowning, Ibushi took Akoya's hand in his, and frowned more at how hard he grasped it. "Prince
Hakone," he said quietly. "I'm sure you have a reasonable explanation."

"I don't have time to explain every choice I made, but I'll remind you that I'm human, and that no human is completely virtuous."

Akoya's grip tightened. "So you don't have an explanation."

"I may be a powerful magician," replied Gora. "But I cannot change the future. I can only put the mechanisms in place for the best possible outcomes of what I have foreseen."

"So allowing Ibushi to be imprisoned, letting Argent fall to a curse, and losing your kingdom was the best possible outcome?"

Gora tilted his head. "I saw that Prince Arima would be safe. I saw that Argent would not be destroyed. I saw that my kingdom, struck by poverty and on the verge of civil war, would destroy itself, if not for the intervention of a greater power."

"But you let Ibushi's captors escape. And why did you leave the dragon?"

"Her majesty was very understanding about the dragon," Gora smiled. "Without Agneya, you wouldn't have convinced his present majesty. She is a means to an end."

Akoya pursed his lips.

Ibushi nodded. "It's true. The king couldn't be convinced by magic alone."

"I know."

"But what about Ibushi's captors?" Akoya pressed, unwilling to let the matter drop. "That demon? The witch?"

"They had a family, they lived peacefully, they grew old and they died."

"But that isn't fair!"

"That's often the way life is."

"But--" Akoya huffed. "Don't their family realise? They should have to pay for what their ancestors did!"

Gora shook his head. "Such feelings are what brought us to this situation in the first place. Prince Arima and the kingdom of Argent are innocent victims, of vengeance wrought on a king long dead."

Chastised, Akoya dropped his attention to his and Ibushi's hands instead. "Why did you put yourself into enchanted sleep?"

"Selfish reasons, in part. I wanted to see that my student was happy. I wanted to see that the world had become the place I saw in my visions. Also, I foresaw that it would take you much longer to find this, if I didn't bring it to you." Gora finally set the scroll on the table.

"This is...?"

"What you were looking for," Gora smiled and got to his feet. "And now my time is up."

"What do you mean your time is up?" Ibushi looked up at him. "We have so many questions, Prince Hakone! You've not been here a day!"
"A day too long, I'm afraid. My slumber took its toll..." Gora rolled his shoulders and lifted his hood back over his head. "Be sure you hone your magic before you leave for Argent."

"But--!"

From across the library came footsteps, and voices: guards coming to take their shift in the cellar.

"Tell Yumoto I'm sorry I couldn't stay longer," Gora raised his arms, his smile barely visible in the shadow of his hood. "Don't forget your magic!"

"Wait!" Ibushi reached forward but was thrown back by a sudden flurry of white feathers.

As the guards shouted in alarm, Ibushi and Akoya could only stare as the flock of doves left the confines of Gora's robes and disappeared like apparitions through the stained glass window. The only sign that Gora had been there was the crumpled mess of his robes on the floor, and a single white feather.

"Io, I'm so tired..." Ryuu had his face nestled against Io's neck, and they didn't dance so much as sway to the music.

"I know," Io pressed his nose into Ryuu's hair, eyes closed. "One more dance and we can take our leave."

Ryuu sighed, body heavy against Io's. He was so exhausted he could barely think, let alone dance. His limbs were like lead, his eyes were dry and sore, his mind clouded. Even talking was an effort, and the only thing that made him believe he could make it back to their rooms was the knowledge that their bed awaited him.

"Alright..." Io squeezed him, Ryuu's weight too much when he could barely support his own. "We'll say our last congratulations to the happy couple, and we'll leave."

Relief seemed to make Ryuu's body heavier. "Mm, love you," he mumbled. "Let's go."

Together they edged through the dancers, making their way towards Kinshirou and Atsushi.

"We came to say goodnight," Io said as they reached them.

Kinshirou frowned slightly, then took note of the weary manner in which Ryuu leaned against his partner. "I understand," he said, nodding. "It's been a busy few days."

"Too busy." Ryuu yawned, too sleepy to fight against it any longer. "Sorry we're going early. I wanted to celebrate for longer."

"It's fine."

"Then we'll take our leave," Io bowed. "Congratulations again, your highnesses."

"Oh, wait!" Atsushi took a step forward, pushing his spectacles further up his nose. "Have you seen Akoya and Ibushi? They left during the speeches. They appeared stressed."

Io shook his head. "They didn't return?"

"They've been gone a long time," Atsushi's gaze clouded with worry.

"If we see them on our way to our rooms, we'll send them back to you," Io promised.

Kinshirou nodded. "We'd be grateful, thank you."

As the princes took their leave, Atsushi sighed. "I hope they find them. We can hardly leave our own wedding to seek them out."

"We can't," Kinshirou kissed Atushi's cheek. "But your cousins can."

"Why didn't I think of that?" Atushi looked about.

En was sitting on his own across the room, his manner relaxed as he watched the room. Meanwhile Yumoto was amongst the dancers, spinning around cheerfully with a smiling Baroness Beach.

Atushi sighed. "It would be a shame to ruin their fun."

"But you're worried, aren't you?"

"...Yes."

"Then if our friends don't return soon, we'll send your cousins to find them."

The Magician Gora's surprising means of departure had done more than enough to startle the guards, and it had taken Akoya far too much time to convince them there was nothing to worry about. He and Ibushi were just fooling around with magic, he told them. He was already in a bad mood before dealing with their disbelief. Having lost his temper with the magician, he was running low on energy, and Ibushi had done little to speak up in agreement.

In fact, Ibushi didn't speak again until the guards had been sent on their way, and he and Akoya were shut in the privacy of Akoya's rooms.

"That scroll must be important," he said, eyes fixed upon the rolled-up parchment.

"So let's look at it." Akoya fell into his chair and rubbed his hands over his face. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew their presence would have been missed at the wedding by now, and that they should stow the scroll away safely and look at it later. But he was tired, and curious, and had plenty to say about what had just taken place in the library.

"Would it have been too much trouble, Ibushi, for you to have supported me when I dealt with the guards? Or with the Magician Gora, for that matter."

Ibushi blinked at him. "Prince Hakone used the last of his power to ensure this was placed in our hands." He took up the scroll, holding onto it reverently. "I wasn't prepared to see him again, and certainly wasn't prepared to see him ascend."

"Ascend? Are you saying he--Oh." Irritation ebbed from Akoya's heart, a heavy weight settling into his chest in its place. "I'm sorry, Ibushi."

Shaking his head, Ibushi managed a smile. "I'm happy to have seen him one last time. He always did his best to help."

His eyes remained on the scroll. It was in poor condition, like many of the others discovered in the
cellar. It looked unimportant, and not at all like a document that carried the secret to breaking such a huge curse.

"Ibushi..."

"I'll open it." Clearing his throat, Ibushi carefully unrolled the scroll, frowning when he saw the water damage. "Prince Hakone couldn't have foreseen this," he sighed.

Akoya shifted closer, frowning at the state of the scroll. Water had damaged it at some point, and the ink had bled and run across the parchment.

"Some of it must be legible," he said. "I refuse to believe that after all this, Magician Gora gave us something useless."

Ibushi smiled faintly. "You believe in him, then."

"Yes," Akoya pouted. "At first I thought him a charlatan, but he showed off too much magic, too much knowledge." He sniffed, holding the scroll at arm's length and trying to decipher the blurred words. "I still don't agree with what he did. He could have stopped anything happening to you, but he didn't."

"I'm glad he didn't." Ibushi spoke quietly, the faintest tremor in his voice, and he smiled when Akoya looked at him. "If nothing had happened, we would never have met."

Confused, Akoya lowered the scroll. "But your family and your kingdom would be safe. You'd be happy."

"Maybe. But I wouldn't have met you." Ibushi reached out, fingertips trailing over Akoya's cheek and threading into his hair. "I don't think I would be happy if I hadn't met you." His voice was a whisper, and the kiss that followed was gentle.

A sense of tranquillity washed through Akoya's heart as he nudged his lips against Ibushi's, as if the weight there had been lifted. Letting the scroll rest in his lap, he pushed a hand through Ibushi's hair, toying with the shorter strands at his nape.

He'd needed this all day. Not just the kiss, but the affection, that warm and tingly sensation caused by Ibushi's touch, the flutter of his words, the reassurance of his gaze.

When their lips parted, he let out a sigh. There was a lot still wrong with the world, but it was a whole lot more bearable with Ibushi there.

Ibushi planted another kiss on his lips before he sat back. "This life is what it is," he murmured.

A faint smile on his face, Akoya nodded. "And it is what we make of it," he agreed. "So let's work out what this says."

They set the scroll on the table, weighting it down with pieces from a long-abandoned game of chess. Standing over the table, the words seemed illegible at first, but with much squinting and help from a magnifying glass, they eventually deciphered the blurred mess of the first few lines.

*On Curses, and Breaking Them*
To free a soul trapped in a mirror's form
Speak spells from a heart with affection warm
To break through a border cursed to be gone
Bring forth a heart of that which was there born
To break the curse of an eternal sleep--

"Ugh, it's unreadable!" Akoya let out a frustrated growl, dropping the magnifying glass onto the scroll. "It's just like before, when I freed you. The exact part I needed was gone! It's almost as if the curse is working on these very scrolls, to prevent anyone from discovering how to break it!"

Ibushi wrapped an arm around him, contemplating the scroll. "Some of this is familiar," he said thoughtfully. "I know it from somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't remember."

"Ugh, we're so close to the truth!" Akoya started fiddling with a strand of hair. "Think, Ibushi! What could the rest be?"

Ibushi shook his head. "I really don't know. We've found how to get into Argent, at least. *Bring forth a heart of that which was there born.*"

"It must mean Agneya. Magician Gora said she's a means to an end. If she wasn't here, she'd be trapped in Argent, and the curse would be unbreakable. So...Ugh," Akoya grimaced. "We take her heart to the border and see what happens, I suppose."

"What?!" Ibushi's voice rose in shock. "We can't do that!"

"It's what the scroll tells us to do. What else is there?"

"There has to be something else. We can't slaughter an innocent dragon for the sake of breaking a curse!"

"So find an alternative!" Akoya threw up his hands. "I don't like it either, Ibushi, but this is what the Magician Gora told us to do!"

"No," Ibushi crossed his arms. "We are not slaughtering my dragon, not even for the sake of my kingdom."

"*Your* dragon?! What do you mean *your* dragon?" Akoya jabbed a finger at him, eyes narrowing, all his earlier anger flaring back up and burning hotter than ever. "Agneya was found by me, in my home, in my kingdom, therefore she's my dragon!"

Ibushi snorted. "She's a dragon! All dragons come from Argent, and I'm Argent's crown prince! She's mine!"

"As far as the world is concerned, Argent doesn't exist. She's in my home and I found her, so she's mine!"
"By that nonsense logic, I'm yours too!"

Akoya took a step back as if he'd been punched, blinking rapidly against the sudden sting of tears. "...I thought you were..."

A tight, uncomfortable knot formed in Ibushi's stomach. "That...that's not what I meant," he said quietly. "But seriously, we can't kill an innocent dragon just to take its heart to the border, in the hope it will break the curse."

"I know that!" Akoya's voice cracked, and he pressed his hands over his eyes, breath shaky. "I hate it too. I don't want it to be the only way."

"Um?" En waved from the doorway, catching Ibushi's attention. "You could take the whole dragon?"

"The whole dragon..." Ibushi stared at him in wonder, feeling a little stupid.

"Yep! A whole dragon's better than a part of one!" Yumoto peered from behind En, eyes wide and hopeful. "Can I meet her before you go?"

Gulping, Akoya turned his back on them and crossed his arms. "How long have you been there?!" he demanded, jutting out his chin as he fought away tears.

En shrugged. "Long enough. So do we get to see this dragon?"

Ibushi glanced at Akoya, heart sinking at his hunched shoulders, the way he hugged himself. Akoya's chin was raised and his eyes were narrowed in irritation, but they glistened with tears, too.

"...You'll have to ask Akoya," Ibushi said, looking back at En and Yumoto. "Agneya is his dragon."

Yumoto bounced on the spot. "Can we see your dragon?"

Akoya's shoulders hunched further. "Do what you want," he muttered. "She's not mine. I don't own anything."

Sighing, Ibushi walked towards the door, with the intention of shooing them away. "Tomorrow," he said. "I'll introduce you to her myself."

Yumoto cheered. "Great! I get to meet a dragon!"

Bopping his cousin lightly on the head, En arched a brow at Ibushi and looked past him to Akoya. "Atchan's worried about you both. Sent us to see what's up."

"Tell him everything is fine," Akoya called back, refusing to turn around. "I'm tired, and intend to sleep early tonight." He strolled towards his bedroom door, pausing there. "Goodnight, Ibushi."

Cringing, Ibushi bowed his head. "Goodnight, Akoya."

He stepped out into the corridor with En and Yumoto, suddenly very weary himself.

"That's it?" En eyed him.

"What?"

"You shouldn't go to sleep after fighting, it gives you stomach ache," Yumoto said, peering up at him.
Ibushi shook his head. "He needs time to himself."

"To get worked up and convince himself you don't care about him?" En's eyes narrowed. "He's like Atchan. An idiot. It's troublesome."

"He's not--"

"He is. Make it better already. Yumoto and I will cover for you at Atchan's party."

Sighing, Ibushi retraced his steps back to Akoya's room.

He heard sobs the moment he opened the door. Heart sinking further, he shut the door behind himself and walked towards the bedroom, his footsteps soft. His mind was full of the argument, of what he'd said, of what Akoya had said. Irritation raged through his heart and he pushed back against it, not wanting to say anything foolish in his anger. He'd said enough already.

It hadn't been his intention to hurt Akoya's feelings. He hadn't meant that he wasn't, heart and soul, his.

Ibushi stepped into the bedroom and winced at the sight before him. Akoya had flung himself onto his bed, and lay there with his back to the door, hugging himself. His shoulders shook with his sobs, the pillow he pressed his face into doing nothing to muffle the sound.

"Akoya..." Ibushi sighed and closed the door.

From the bed came a shaky sigh.

"Go away."

It was clear from his whiny tone that he was as sulky as he was upset. But this wasn't a tantrum. His tears didn't come from selfishness. They came from a place of genuine pain, and Ibushi was disgusted with himself for causing it.

Crossing to the bed, he knelt down on the floor. "I don't have anywhere to go. Besides, I don't want to go anywhere."

"You can go to your room."

"My heart would still be here with you. My thoughts would be with you. My soul would be with you."

"You aren't mine. All of you will be gone the moment you leave me..." Words catching in his throat, Akoya curled up tighter.

"Of course I'm yours."

"Why did you say you're not, then?"

"Because I--" Ibushi frowned as he fought to calm. "I meant I'm not your possession. You found me, and I'm in your home, but that doesn't mean you can claim me as your own, and the same goes for Agneya. That's what I meant."

Akoya didn't reply, only took a deep, shuddering breath and pushed his face back into the pillow.

Ibushi began stroking his hair, toying gently with the silky pink strands. "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings," he said. "I never wanted to hurt you. I was angry, and I spoke without thinking."
"...Me too..." The reply was mumbled, but heartfelt.

Taking a deep breath, Ibushi shifted to sit on the edge of the bed. "I'm yours," he murmured. "Not because you found me, but because I love you, and willingly give myself to you."

"I'm yours too," Akoya let out a sigh, rubbing his face against the pillow. "I'm sorry for what I said about your dragon. I don't want her to be hurt. I should have realised there was a better way. After everything else, it's an easy problem to solve."

"Sometimes those solutions are so obvious we overlook them, hm? And there has been a lot of 'everything else', hasn't there?"

"Hm."

Fingers still trailing through Akoya's hair, Ibushi thought about the challenges of the past few days--and the weeks, the months. Through the mirror, he'd seen how tired Akoya had been after long days of research. He'd watched him lie awake, mind too full of his progress and his problems, and he'd talked to him as he drifted into slumber, still failing to find solutions yet too exhausted to stay awake any longer. On escaping the mirror, he'd held him for the first time, only to be found by the king. They'd faced the king's wrath, faced disbelief and suspicion and unkindness. Akoya had given up his birthright in hope of pleasing his father, had fought for his friends to be wed, and foregone the respect of the kingdom in order for that wedding to go ahead.

Thinking of how tired and uptight Akoya had looked today, Ibushi wished he'd done something about it. There was little he could do to stop the rumours and unkind gossip, but he could have drawn him away before it got too much. Then maybe they wouldn't have fought over Gora's scroll.

The encounter with Gora had definitely pushed Akoya to breaking point. Their argument had pushed him over the edge.

"I'm sorry," Ibushi murmured. "It's all been too much, hasn't it?"

Akoya heaved a shaky breath. "It would have been, if you weren't here."

A tiny smile tugged at the edge of Ibushi's lips. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good. Please stay... I love you. I'm sorry."

"I love you too."

Tension eased from Akoya's form, his shoulders slowly straightening, his breathing softening. Ibushi leaned down and kissed his hair.

"Do I get to see your beautiful face, or are you going to keep hiding it against that pillow?"

"I don't want you to see me like this."

Ibushi didn't need to see his face to know he was pouting. He smiled, rubbing his shoulder as fondness welled up in the place where frustration had long since fled. "I've seen you cry before," he said. "You're still beautiful."

Heaving a sigh, Akoya rolled onto his back and peered up at him, eyes bloodshot and face red and blotchy. "There," he said, expression softening when their gazes met. He reached up, pushing Ibushi's hair back from his face. "I'm sorry for hurting you. I did, didn't I?"
Ibushi pressed a kiss to his palm. "That's enough sorries for one night, beautiful." He held Akoya's hand against his cheek, eyes half-closed. "Time to forgive and move on."

Akoya's eyes widened slightly. "But you will stay, won't you?"

"I told you, I'm not going anywhere," Ibushi closed the space between them, his kiss sweet and tender. "My heart and soul are with you even when we're apart," he whispered. As he started to pull back, he found himself held in place by two hands that grasped tightly at his frock coat.

"Stay," Akoya implored softly, an aching loneliness creeping into his heart at the thought that after all this, Ibushi might go back to his rooms. "I need you with me. Please, stay."

Settling on the blankets beside him, Ibushi drew him into another kiss. "I'm yours," he murmured. "I'll stay your side until you bid me to go."
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The morning after the wedding is different for everybody. As the day goes on, Ryuu faces a fear, and Atsushi's anxieties grow.

Chapter Notes

It feels like ages since I updated this!

Sunlight filtered through the open window, and with it came birdsong, slowly awakening two drowsy figures snuggled beneath the sheets.

Opening his eyes, Atsushi smiled at the slightly-blurred sight of Kinshirou beside him. Cuddling closer, his heart skipped a beat to see delicate eyelids flutter open, revealing a sleepy, vivid green.

"Good morning, husband," he murmured.

Kinshirou smiled, planting a kiss on Atsushi's lips. "Good morning, husband."

"It feels good, doesn't it?"

"It does..." Kinshirou admired his wedding band in the morning light, filled with warmth and awe. "I never thought I'd marry during my stay in Perla. Or ever, really."

Atsushi hummed and caught hold of his hand, the tiny gemstones of their rings glinting softly as he entwined their fingers. "I came here to marry, but never suspected I would come to marry the love of my life."

"Atchan..." Kinshirou kissed his knuckles, a new kind of heat rising from deep within, and a desperation to be closer. "We fell asleep too quickly last night."

"The partying went on for some time..."

"Mm, and then we came back and went to sleep."

"Everyone was tired after--oh..." Atsushi's breath hitched when Kinshirou's hand ghosted over his chest. "We...we didn't..."

"We didn't," Kinshirou agreed, nuzzling Atsushi's neck and nipping him softly.

"But the staff will soon--hngh!" Atsushi gasped, body suddenly hot and alert beneath Kinshirou's touch. "We shouldn't..."

"We should," Kinshirou smiled against Atsushi's skin. "Marriages are meant to be consummated."
"But what if someone...hah...."

"Make love to me, husband," Kinshirou purred.

Atsushi moaned softly. "When you put it that way..."

Smiling, he rolled over, body pressed against his husband's as he drew him into a warm, hungry kiss.

Zundar stood at the bedroom door, eyeing the pair on the bed. He'd heard plenty of gossip about his master recently. The sight before him more or less confirmed that gossip, but Zundar didn't consider such rumours - or what he was looking at - to necessarily be bad.

This wasn't even surprising. Ever since Prince Ibushi appeared at the palace, Zundar had wondered when this would happen, rather than if, and he was somewhat pleased about what he saw.

For, if he understood the matter correctly, the foreign prince was the reason for his master's gradual change in personality. It was due to this prince that Akoya was bearable - likeable, even. Serving him was no longer a toil, but a joy.

His master was sleeping soundly, his face peaceful, his limbs tangled with those of Prince Ibushi, whose slumber appeared equally deep and tranquil, his face tucked against Akoya's neck.

It was a heart-warming sight, Zundar decided. The only annoying thing was that they'd slept in their formal clothes, and it would take a lot of work to get the creases out. Zundar supposed he had to be thankful the pair had bothered to kick off their boots before falling asleep on top of the blankets.

The events that led the pair here would remain a mystery, but one thing was clear: this morning, he would be serving breakfast for two in his master's rooms.

As quietly as possible, Zundar tiptoed out and went to make the arrangements, leaving the princes to sleep on.

Io and Ryuu had woken before dawn. Aware of the silence in the castle, they had bathed together without bothering to summon staff. Then they'd dressed and gone for a walk in the castle grounds, on Ryuu's request.

Though he'd not awoken during the night, Ryuu had dreamt of dragons again. He wasn't comfortable being in the palace, knowing that they slept in a place where a dragon resided. But the early morning had been silent and peaceful, and they'd found a secluded part of the gardens in which they sat to watch the sunrise. Wrapped in Io's arms as the sky changed colour above, Ryuu finally regained a sense of inner peace.

Io must have sensed it, because he'd kissed Ryuu's forehead once the sun had risen, and silently led him back toward the now bustling palace.

The route back to their quarters took them past Akoya's rooms, and the comparative quiet in the corridor caught Ryuu's attention.

"We never did see them last night," he whispered to Io, not wanting to disturb the peaceful
atmosphere. "I wonder where they went."

Io shook his head. "Likely the same place as we did, Ryuu," he said, glancing at Akoya's door as they passed it.

"Bed?" A smirk formed on Ryuu's face. "You really think they snuck off together that early?"

Zundar appeared at the end of the corridor before Io could respond, his footsteps light and a neatly-folded pile of clothes in his hands. He bowed when he caught sight of them.

"Good morning, your highnesses."

"Good morning, Zundar," Ryuu glanced at the clothes. "Is my cousin awake yet?"

"Not yet, your highness. I feel it may be some time before his highness is ready to face the world today."

"I see," Ryuu grinned. "Tell him and Prince Ibushi that they were missed last night."

"Ryuu!" hissed Io, seeing the way the colour drained from Zundar's face. He smiled at the aide. "Their secret is safe with us."

Zundar inclined his head. "I question whether there was any secret to begin with, your highness, but I'm sure their highnesses will appreciate the sentiment."

"I'm sure," Io nodded. "We mustn't hold you up any longer. Come on, Ryuu."

As Io led him along the corridor, Ryuu glanced back to see Zundar disappear into Akoya's rooms.

"Io," he said, too excited to whisper anymore. "Did you see those clothes?"

"Yes, I saw the clothes."

"Those weren't Akoya's colours."

"I noticed."

"My brat cousin is growing up..." Ryuu laughed.

Io arched a brow. "Isn't he older than you?"

"A bit, but that's all relative, isn't it?" Ryuu smiled. "Let's hurry and get tidied up for breakfast. I can't wait to find out what went on after we left the party last night."

"Always eager to socialise, my Ryuu," Io kissed him softly. "Let's go, then."

If Ryuu had hoped to gather some gossip at breakfast, he was sorely disappointed when he and Io arrived. There were many empty seats at the table, as nobles remained in bed nursing hangovers and otherwise catching up on sleep lost through the long night of wedding festivities. Even the king and queen weren't present.

But the most notable absence (and most suspicious, in Ryuu's opinion) was that of Akoya and Ibushi.
It was to be expected for Kinshirou and Atsushi to want to spend their first morning of married life alone together. It was even to be expected that most of the other absenteees were suffering as a result of yesterday's celebrations.

Yet Akoya's absence, along with that of Ibushi, seemed a poor decision in light of all the rumours, and Ryuu wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Do you think he wants people to hate him?" he whispered to Io, as their food was being served.

"Nobody wants to be hated," Io said. "Why would he want that?"

Ryuu shrugged. "So it's easier to push his responsibilities onto me?"

"But you're not going to accept that, are you?"

"You know I won't."

"I know," Io confirmed, briefly squeezing Ryuu's hand. "I knew the moment we received that letter from him. Economic benefits aside, that's too much for one person."

"If even you say it's too much, then it must be..." Ryuu leaned back in his chair as he chewed a mouthful of food. He didn't like the thought of having to rule Perla as well as Vesta one day. Vesta was enough, and at some point in the future, he'd be married to Io. Io would be king of Gaia, which would sort-of unite the two kingdoms, and two kingdoms was more than enough.

Ryuu swallowed his mouthful and washed it down with a sip of tea. "Seriously, they should have come to breakfast."

"So that's what this is about..." Io smiled faintly. "I think so too. The table is a little empty this morning."

"Everyone's still sleeping!" Yumoto called out, having overheard.

Beside him, En yawned. "Wish I was still sleeping..."

"The celebrations didn't finish until late, I hear," Ryuu said, happy to get onto another subject.

"Too late," En grumbled. "Plus Atchan sent us on errands."

"Errands?" Ryuu leaned forward eagerly.

"Yeah!" Yumoto nodded cheerfully. "Atchan and Kinchan were worried about their friends, so they sent us to find them!"

Io looked over the top of his teacup. "And did you?"

"Yeah, they were arguing about the dragon," Yumoto grinned. "We get to meet her today!"

Ryuu froze. "Meet her?"

"I asked Prince Ibushi and he said to ask Akoya 'cos it's his dragon, but Akoya was sulking and said it wasn't his dragon and we could do what we wanted, so Ibushi said he'd introduce us to Ag..ag..."

"Agneya," supplied En.

"Agneya! He said he'd introduce us to her today!" Yumoto blinked, looking around. "Maybe we
should go find him and ask when we get to visit."

Aware of how still and quiet Ryuu had become, Io reached over and gently took his hand. "So the
dragon is safe?" he asked.

"She wouldn't be alive if she was dangerous," En pointed out. "Isn't Prince Ibushi some dragon
tamer or something?"

Yumoto nodded, far too energetic for somebody who had spent most of the night at the wedding
celebrations. "Yeah! He can speak to them! Enchan, let's finish breakfast and find out about visiting
her!"

"We'll take our time," En mumbled, resting his chin in his hand. "He isn't awake yet, I'll bet. It's too
early..."

"But I want to see the dragon! I bet she's beautiful! Atchan said she's huge and shiny, and can make
so much fire!"

"Can we change the subject, please?" Io cut in. Ryuu was gripping his hand so tightly it hurt.

"Aw, but dragons are exciting!" Yumoto protested.

Ryuu cleared his throat. "Do you think," he asked quietly, "That I could come along too?"

Yumoto beamed at him. "Yeah! I bet you could!"

Io frowned, leaning in to murmur in Ryuu's ear. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Ryuu replied, a quiver in his voice and a forced smile on his lips. "If I can't face a fear
like this, how am I ever going to face running an entire kingdom?"

Io squeezed his hand. "And that's what makes you king material, Ryuu." Louder, he spoke to the
others. "I want to come too."

"Great! We'll all go to see the dragon!" Yumoto cheered. "Alright, we should hurry up and get
ready!"

"Prince Ibushi isn't even here yet," En pointed out. "We must wait for him."

"I know that, but we can still get ready!"

As breakfast continued, they drifted away from the talk about dragons. Io noted the relief in Ryuu's
face that the others had moved on from the subject. But though Ryuu smiled and joked with
everyone, he couldn't quite hide the tremor in his hands.

Akoya awoke to the sound of his staff moving about his reception room, and the comforting warmth
of Ibushi's body against his. It felt new and awkward to be waking up with him like this. He'd not
slept beside anyone like this before, and wasn't sure how to behave.

But Ibushi was still sleeping, and he was comfortable, so he still had time to figure it out. Closing his
eyes again, he listened to the sounds coming from next door: chairs being put back into place and the
soft clink of china. He pictured Zundar setting up the table for breakfast.

...The table....
Akoya's eyes shot open and he sat up rapidly, dislodging Ibushi from his position against him. "The scroll!" he exclaimed.

"Hm?" Ibushi opened his eyes, blinking at him in a sleepy fashion. "Akoya?"

"We left the scroll out!"

He shifted to get off the bed, only for Ibushi to pull him back into his arms. "It's on your dressing table," he mumbled tiredly. "Zundar brought it in earlier."

"Zundar--" Akoya's eyes widened. "He saw us?!"

"I was pretending to sleep at the time, but yes, he saw us."

"Now people will really gossip. Ugh, my father is going to be furious..."

"Everything will be fine. The people are already gossiping, and your father isn't to know. Besides," Ibushi smiled, looking down at their still-clothed bodies. "This is perfectly innocent, isn't it?"

Heat rose in Akoya's cheeks. "Yes," he agreed. "But Zundar will tell my father."

"I don't think he will. He's discreet."

"Right..." Akoya sighed, finally letting his head drop back onto the pillow. "We can trust him," he decided. After all, his letter had reached Ryuu without the king's knowledge, and that was thanks to Zundar. The rest of the palace staff might be fickle, but Zundar was loyal.

"We can," Ibushi ran his fingers through Akoya's hair. "...Akoya?"

"Yes?"

Akoya peeked at him, and a fluttering, fond sensation took hold in Ibushi's chest.

He smiled. "Good morning."

"...Good morning, Ibushi." Cheeks pink, Akoya smiled back and shifted closer. How many mornings had he awoken alone in his bed, wishing to have Ibushi beside him? It had been impossible for so long, and now here they were. Albeit in completely the wrong garments for sleeping, but Akoya could let that breach of protocol go. Their formal clothes from yesterday could be laundered and pressed and would be good as new. Creased clothing wasn't important at a moment like this. He was comfortable and content. In these last blissful minutes before Zundar came to announce breakfast, he could pretend to have no cares in the world, and enjoy being there in Ibushi's arms.

It was late afternoon by the time the palace began to fully wake up. Wedding guests wandered dopily through the corridors, sharing little titbits of gossip and nursing hangovers. They were unaware that elsewhere in the palace, a group was making its way into the cellars to where the dragon lay. If not for Io and Ryuu being there, Ibushi wasn't sure the king's guards would have permitted them into the cellars. Akoya had declined to join the group, stating that he wanted to examine Gora's scroll further, which left Ibushi as the sole guide to Yumoto and En, and the rather unexpected Ryuu and Io.

Still, Ibushi was glad the other princes were present. He'd got the impression that Ryuu feared dragons. The prince's pale face and quietness was enough of a confirmation, not to mention the way
he stuck close to Io, or the way Io kept a firm, protective arm around Ryuu's shoulders.

As he led the group down into the cellar passageway, Ibushi made it his mission to prove to Ryuu that dragons were safe. After all, if Argent was freed from its curse, the world would suddenly find itself host to a lot more of them.

Eager to see the dragon, Yumoto bounced ahead of the group, stopping now and then to ask how much further it was.

"Just a little further," Ibushi called back. "Wait for us, Duke Scarlet."

"I'm waiting! Huh, Gora walked down this same hallway right?" Yumoto had taken the news of Gora's departure remarkably well, considering Gora was his ancestor. "I'm glad he got to see the palace one last time!"

From the back of the group, En yawned. "Didn't think it was this far down."

"It had to be far away to escape detection, I suppose," Io commented. He gave Ryuu a gentle squeeze. "Don't you think, Ryuu?"

"Hm..." Ryuu nodded, biting his lip. His stomach was churning, and breathing felt hard. He balled his hands into fists and scowled, wishing his fear away. Nobody else here was afraid of the dragon. Yumoto couldn't wait to see it. En was unruffled. Even Ibushi, who had almost been engulfed by its flames, remained unafraid.

Eyeing the prince's back, Ryuu gulped. It made no sense that Ibushi wasn't scared of dragons after such a frightening experience. Anybody with a shred of sense would be terrified after that.

Ryuu supposed it was even greater proof that he was unfit to be heir to Vesta's throne.

Except that was why he was here, on this death-wish expedition to meet a dragon. He was terrified, but he had to do this. If he could do this, he would be halfway brave enough to rule a kingdom. If he could do this, he was good enough to marry Io.

But as they neared the doorway at the end of the passage, Ryuu's steps began to falter, and he had to force himself onward. His senses seemed to dull with every footstep, the voices of the others becoming murmurs beneath the rushing of blood in his ears, the hammering of his heart. Each breath was a burden, and the brightly-lit doorway blurred before Ryuu's eyes.

"Ryuu?" Io pulled him to a stop before they reached the door, disturbing him from his thoughts. He waited for En to slip past them before he spoke again. "We don't have to do this if you don't want to."

Hot tears welled up in Ryuu's eyes, and he shook his head. "I can't. I have to."

"You don't."

"But I--"

From the room came an overjoyed shout: Yumoto declared the dragon to be bigger and more beautiful than he expected.

Ryuu winced. "I must do this, Io."

Io frowned when Ryuu pulled from his grasp, and followed him as he stumbled towards the door.
"Why? Why must you do this?"

"Because I've got to. For the sake of the future."

"Whether you see a dragon or not doesn't make a difference to the future."

Ryuu stopped, steadying himself with one hand against the wall. "It does."

"Why?"

"I need to be good enough."

"Good enough for what, Ryuu?!"

"You."

Io sighed and stepped up behind him. "You already are," he said, gently massaging Ryuu's shoulders. "Sometimes I think I'm not good enough for you, but I'm not having that conversation down here. I love you. So long as you love me too, you're more than good enough for me."

"Heh..." Ryuu bowed his head. "Same goes for you."

Io squeezed his shoulders. "Do you want to go back?"

"No."

"Ryuu..."

Ibushi appeared in the doorway, head tilted, his expression curious. "Are you scared?"

"I..." Ryuu averted his gaze and swallowed hard. "Yeah."


"I-I know that!" Ryuu scowled. "Alright, I'm coming."

"I'm coming too," Io confirmed, wrapping a hand around Ryuu's. "And for the record, I'm terrified."

"So was I, when she sneezed on us," Ibushi chuckled softly. "There will be no fire today. Agneya is a good girl." He stepped back into the room, calling out a command to Agneya and leaving the princes to enter in their own time.

Ryuu took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"We can still turn back," Io whispered.

"No way. Unless you want to."

"Not unless you do."

"I don't. I mean, I do, but I don't want to let myself." Ryuu opened his eyes, grip on Io's hand tightening. "I want to prove that I'm a brave heir to the throne, who can handle anything. Even fire-breathing dragons."

"And marriage?" Io smiled.
"Especially marriage."

"You're incredibly brave, Ryuu. You're amazing."

"I'm not. I'm freaking terrified. Let's go."

Holding his breath, Ryuu forced himself to take the final step forward, into the room.

He didn't look directly at the dragon, instead kept it in his peripheral vision as he walked further inside. He heard Yumoto's excited cries, En's mumbles of agreement, and Ibushi's steady commands in some weird language he didn't understand. He felt the heat of the dragon's breath, not nearly as blistering as he'd expected, more like a warm summer breeze. He felt Io's thumb gently stroking the back of his hand.

"She's beautiful," Io said, a faint tremble in his voice that suggested either awe or terror.

Ryuu looked at him, and saw the way Io's eyes had widened, how his brows had risen in surprise.

"You can come closer," Ibushi called out. "You don't have to sit on her back or anything."

Yumoto squeaked. "Can I sit on her back?!"

"You'll have to ask her that." Ibushi spoke the dragon-language again, the only discernable word being Yumoto's name.

There was a soft rumble from the dragon. Ryuu winced, expecting a burst of flame at any moment. Instead he heard a heavy thud, and a sigh.

"Huh, fancy that..." A smile formed on Io's face.

Curiosity got the better of Ryuu. He finally looked at the dragon, and saw that she lay on the floor, golden eyes calm and patient as Ibushi boosted Yumoto up onto her back. For a moment the duke scrabbled against her shining green scales, then managed to hoist himself into position. He sat up and grinned, waving down at the others.

"This is so cool! Enchan you should try it!"

"Too much effort," En replied. He patted Agneya's nose. "Bet you feel good after all that sleep..."

The dragon lowered her head further, closing her eyes to his pats.

En nodded, a tiny grin on his face. "Yeah, thought so."

"We'll get her out of here in a day or two," Ibushi said, running a hand over Agneya's flank. "The guards found her harness and saddle, which the saddler has taken to repair. Agneya will soon be back in action."

Ryuu shuddered. "That's kind of..." he bit his lip. It would be rude to say it was scary. Besides, he had a weird feeling that the dragon understood what he was saying. "Um. It's good, I mean," he said. "This isn't the place for a dragon."

"It isn't," Ibushi agreed. "You can come closer, if you want."

"This is close enough, I think," Io said.
Ryuu gazed at him, lips pursed. He could see that Io wanted to go closer. Io was staring at the dragon in the way he stared at a beautiful jewel.

He couldn't hold him back like this.

Clearing his throat, Ryuu shook his head. "Let's get closer," he said. "You want to see, right?"

"Yes, but--"

"So let's say hello to the dragon..." Ryuu tugged Io closer, trying to pretend that he wasn't scared. "W-what's her name again, Prince Ibushi?"

"Agneya," Ibushi replied.

As if in response, the dragon glanced at him and let out a series of quiet rumbles, to which Ibushi smiled.

"She knows you're afraid, and says you can pat her tail if her nose is too scary."

Yumoto giggled. "Did she really say that?"

"Dragons have a sense of humour, huh?" En patted Agneya's nose.

"They all have their own personality, just like us humans," Ibushi explained.

"I'm going to pat her nose, if that's alright," Ryuu decided. His hands were shaking, and he felt nauseous being so close to the dragon. But this close, he could see how relaxed the creature was, and how clumsy En's pats were. If the dragon allowed the boisterous Yumoto to clamber onto her back, and allowed En to heavy-handedly pat her on the nose, then a gentler touch wasn't going to cause offence, no matter how terrifying Ryuu found the prospect.

Ibushi smiled, and murmured some dragon-speak to Agneya.

The dragon shifted, turning her head towards Ryuu and resting her chin on the ground, eyes closing.

"Go ahead," Ibushi said. "It's safe."

Ryuu glanced at Io. Seeing his nod of encouragement, he hesitantly shuffled forward and rested a hand on the dragon's nose. It wasn't hot like he'd expected. She was warm like any other animal, and her scales were smooth to the touch.

"Um," Ryuu said. "Hello, Agneya."

Joining him, Io patted the other side of her nose. "You're beautiful," he said softly. "Thank you for being kind to Ryuu."

Agneya let out a long, rumbly sigh.

"He's brave for patting her nose," Ibushi translated. "She's pleased to have your trust."

"Yeah? Well I'm pleased to be able to meet her," Ryuu smiled a little, lightly running a hand over her scales. This wasn't too scary. Agneya was huge, but she wasn't like the ferocious dragons of his nightmares. She was more like a giant pet dog, and Ibushi being there to interpret her rumbles and grumbles made her much easier to understand. Much less scary than Ryuu had thought. "I-I like her," he said, finally withdrawing his hand.
"I like her too," Io nodded, smiling at him. "Maybe we should look for dragons in our cellars as well."

"Make sure you send for me if you find one," Ibushi grinned at them. "Agneya wants to nap now, so we'll head back."

Though he'd resolved to no longer be afraid of dragons, Ryuu experienced a rush of relief at the other prince's words. He fell silent once more as the group headed made their return, his hand seeking out Io's and holding on tightly all the way back to their rooms.

Unlike at breakfast, the table was full at dinner time. The palace had recovered from its hangover, and the room was alive with chatter, most of which was praising the king for throwing such a wonderful wedding celebration for Atsushi and Kinshirou.

However, at the king's end of the table, talk had turned to the dragon.

"I hear your dragon will be released from the cellar the day after tomorrow," the king said to Akoya, who had been quietly sulking that he still was unable to sit beside Ibushi.

"Oh? That's wonderful news," Akoya smiled brightly, mood improving. A freed dragon meant he was closer to leaving. He wanted to head for Argent's border as soon as possible, and help Ibushi free the kingdom from its curse. He'd yet to find how to break the curse, but had confidence in doing so.

"Agneya is eager to smell fresh air again, your Majesty," Ibushi addressed the king. "Were she able to converse with you, I'm sure she'd be grateful to know you've set your saddler to work repairing her tack."

The king let out a hearty chuckle. "I'm sure she would," he agreed, signalling for more wine. "There are many here who are eager to see her, but too cowardly to walk into the cellars and look upon her themselves."

"Darling, we haven't visited the living dragon either," the queen reminded him, a teasing smile on her face. "We really ought to."

"My dear!" the king took his wife's hand. "We shall be the first to welcome her back into the fresh air!" He looked down the table, where several nobles were trying not to meet his gaze. "I hope you will all be present on the occasion."

Kurotori nodded. "It will be a memorable event I'm sure, your majesty! I for one cannot wait to meet the dragon!"

"Then perhaps you'd like to join Ibushi and I when we visit her later," Akoya cut in, eyeing the duke. The man was always trying to win favour with the king, and it annoyed him.

"Oh, I really couldn't intrude on his highness' time!" Kurotori replied quickly. "Besides, surely a visit to the dragon is an honour only for a prince."

"But me and Enchan went today, and we're just dukes!" Yumoto interrupted, a cheerful smile on his face. "Ibushi took us with Io and Ryuu, it was fun!"

Akoya raised a brow at Ryuu. "You went to see Agneya?"
"Yeah?" Ryuu effected a laugh. "Why so surprised? It isn't like I'm scared or anything."

Io looked at him fondly. "I was scared," he announced. "But Ryuu's bravery made it possible for me to step forward. When I saw him make contact with the dragon, and how content she was to be touched, I was no longer afraid."

"I didn't realise you were scared of dragons," Atsushi said, peering across at him. "It's really brave to face your fears."

"I could only do it because of Ryuu." Io touched Ryuu's shoulder. "Ryuu is the brave one."

Ryu smiled sheepishly. "...alright, so maybe I was scared," he admitted.

"Terrified, if I recall correctly," Ibushi commented, a twinkle of amusement in his eye.

Io quirked a brow. "Didn't you say that was sensible?"

"I did, and it is. Nobody sensible would approach an unknown creature without an element of fear in their heart."

"Wise words," agreed the king, between sips of wine.

"I wasn't scared!" Yumoto said.

"Prince Ibushi said 'nobody sensible', Yumoto," En pointed out, earning an amused laugh from those around them.

"Prince Ibushi said 'nobody sensible', Yumoto," En pointed out, earning an amused laugh from those around them.

Yumoto laughed with them. "We're lucky to have a dragon tamer here! It's so amazing that we're all right here in Perla where all the magic is happening!"

His comment struck a chord with the other diners, and conversation dimmed into thoughtful silence as everybody contemplated the fact that here, in Perla, they were the first witnesses to discoveries that would change the world.

Looking across the table, Akoya caught Ibushi's eye, need tugging at his heart and stomach fluttering when he saw a tiny smile form on Ibushi's lips. Whilst others were eager to stay in Perla and find out what was discovered next, he and Ibushi could barely wait to get away.

It was evening, and Io and Ryuu found themselves in the palace gardens once again, walking by the light of the moon. The gardens looked magical after sunset, the stone sculptures luminescent in moonlight, and the flowers, so bright and cheerful by day, appearing monochrome beneath the dark sky.

It was an enchanting sight, Io thought, but he could see that Ryuu's thoughts were elsewhere--and he could guess what he was thinking about.

"Let's sit for a while," he said, spying a vine-covered arbour just off the path. He led Ryuu inside and together they sank down on the seat, settled comfortably against each other with a view across the darkened gardens.

Knowing that Ryuu's thoughts would spill out eventually, Io wrapped an arm around him and rested their heads together.

Silence fell between them, which only served to make the garden feel more magical. All Io could
hear was the rustle of the breeze through the bushes, and Ryuu's breath, gentle and steady.

"...I've been thinking," Ryuu said, breaking the silence with a quiet voice. He hugged Io around his middle and let out a soft laugh. "I'm thinking that I'm fine with a dragon in a cellar, but not so great with the thought of one rampaging through the countryside."

"I doubt Ibushi will let Agneya rampage," Io's fingers found their way into Ryuu's hair, and he massaged his scalp gently. "But I understand. Shall we set off for home tomorrow?"

Ryuu pulled back, eyes wide and full of uncertainty. "Shouldn't we wait for the dragon to be released? That's what a brave man would do, right?"

"You are brave. You faced your biggest fear today, and you beat it."

"Yeah, but a dragon in a cellar is different to a dragon in the sky."

"It's the same dragon, though."

Gaze averted, Ryuu's expression grew thoughtful. "...It's still scary to think about."

"It's alright to be scared." Io pulled Ryuu close again, and kissed his forehead. "You're amazing, Ryuu. I'm so proud of you. You went beyond what I thought you would do in order to face your fear. You were incredible."

"Heh, I'm not incredible, just scared..." Ryuu pulled back again, suddenly confused. "Wait, what did you expect I'd do?"

"I expected you to look at the dragon, and leave again as soon as it was polite to. But you stayed, and you even walked close and petted her. You're so brave."

"I'm not. I could only do it because you were with me."

"Do you have any idea how many things I can only do because you are with me?" Io smiled, fondness bursting forth in his heart. "Ryuu, if not for you, I wouldn't have patted Agneya either. I was really scared."

Ryuu's brows rose. "Really? You were scared?"

"Of course. I'd never seen a living dragon before."

"But you're always so courageous, Io! You never let fear get the better of you!"

"That's because you are with me." Io caressed Ryuu's cheek, smiling at the way he half-closed his eyes to his touch. "I can face any fear for your sake."

"Io..." Ryuu let out a soft sigh, closing his eyes as he kissed Io's palm. "I can face any fear for your sake, too." He opened his eyes again, catching hold of Io's hand. "Let's...let's stay to see Agneya released."

Io brought Ryuu's hand to his lips, kissing it. He could feel the way Ryuu was trembling, and the night air was too warm for that tremor to be from the cold.

"We'll prepare for our return, so we can take our leave on the very same day," he decided. "If you want to go home before then, we shall. Don't force yourself, Ryuu."

"I'm not...I mean, I am, but I've got to," Ryuu's expression grew determined. "In the future, there will
be a lot of things I don't want to do, but I'll have no choice in the matter. So I should practise doing it now, before I become king of Vesta."

"King of Vesta and Prince Consort of Gaia," Io corrected, a tender smile upon his lips. "You're wonderful, Ryuu. If we weren't already engaged, I would propose to you right now."

Ryuu's expression softened into a smile, a little of the fear fading from his eyes. "You could propose again," he said. "After all, we weren't exactly dressed for the occasion before."

Io laughed quietly and kissed his cheek. "You're right."

Getting up from the seat, he sank down onto one knee instead, enveloping Ryuu's hands in his own. Ryuu grinned at him, and Io smiled back, heart fluttering with nerves that didn't make any sense. He knew what Ryuu's answer would be. Ryuu had already given it. This was just play.

However, here in the moonlight, the atmosphere felt far more romantic than when they had been in their undergarments in their room.

Io cleared his throat.

"Ryuu," he began. "We are young, and we have so much life to live. We have so many things to see, so many triumphs to win, so many moments to experience that will be so much better if we're together. I love you, and want to share my entire life with you. Will you marry me?"

Ryuu beamed. "Yes," he uttered, stomach bubbling with so much excitement it was as though this was Io's first proposal. "I'll happily marry you, Io."

"We'll announce it once we're back in Gaia," Io smiled, rejoining him on the seat. "It feels more official now, somehow."

"Probably because we're not almost naked," Ryuu laughed. "I love you, Io."

"I love you too."

Smiling, Ryuu drew Io into an affectionate kiss, a kiss that rapidly grew more heated as Io's arms slipped around Ryuu's waist and Ryuu's hands snuck inside Io's shirt.

There in the privacy of the arbour, none but the moon bore witness to what unfolded between them.

Beneath the palace, Agneya looked on with sleepy-eyed interest as two figures melted into one.

"That's good!" Ibushi murmured, impressed.

Distracted, the figure split again, and two Akoyas beamed at him.

"You really think so?" Identical sets of lips moved in unison, but the voice came from the one on the right.

Ibushi smiled at the real prince. "It took me a week to learn this magic. It's taken you an evening. Your great-grandfather's blood is strong in your veins."

"Do you think he would have been proud of me?"

"I think so, yes."
Akoya let out a slow breath, focusing on the magical projection beside himself and drawing it back in. "Even though I only just started to learn?" he asked, once the projection had disappeared.

"Especially since you only just started," Ibushi held out a hand to him. "We've skipped a lot of the basics, but this is about what you need to know, not what you should know."

Linking fingers with him, Akoya stepped in close. "What else do I need to know?" he inquired. "I still fail to see why it might be useful to project a copy of myself."

"Once you can make that copy move independently to yourself, you can use it as a decoy against attacks, though I hope you'll never need to."

"Oh..."

Ibushi smiled, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. "Want to try something else?"

"That's what we're here for, Ibushi."

"Good, then I think you're ready to learn how to create a shield."

"The way you can?" Akoya smiled at the thought. Ibushi's defence magic was impressive.

Ibushi tilted his head. "Your own version of it. Each magical shield is unique to the person who wields it."

"Then let's get on with it! Tell me what to do?" Akoya took a step back, eager to begin. Learning magic gave him such a thrill, and he'd begun to practise a number of new spells today, solely through studying the scrolls from the cellars.

Learning magic with Ibushi, however, was an even greater pleasure. As Ibushi took up a position behind him, repositioning his arms and murmuring instructions into his ear, Akoya wished this teaching would never end.

It was the middle of the night, and Atsushi lay watching Kinshirou sleep. He was still struggling to believe that they were married, and that through their bond, Epinard was now safe from the tyranny of his sister. The diplomats from his kingdom had left for home today, and Atsushi knew that he and Kinshirou should soon follow. Much as he enjoyed life in Perla, he missed the green countryside of Epinard, missed his parents and his friends there.

But had Epinard missed him? He and Kinshirou would have to take a tour of the kingdom upon their arrival, and greet their subjects. Atsushi had always been happy to be seen at Kinshirou's side, but thinking of the tour ahead of them made his stomach knot with anxiety. His sister had sympathisers all across the kingdom. There was no doubt that they would run into them, and Atsushi didn't feel safe anymore.

Heaving a sigh, he slipped from the bed and put on his glasses, then pulled on his dressing robe. He cast a final, longing glance at Kinshirou's slumbering form before he left the room. He'd give anything to be able to sleep peacefully at his husband's side tonight. Anything but his kingdom, anyway. His kingdom needed him. Without him, there was no telling what tragedy would befall its people at the hands of his sister.

Atsushi padded through the next room and sat down at the writing desk, lighting the candle there. The moon shone brightly through the window, but the candle provided a gentler light to write by,
and Atsushi found comfort in the yellow glow of the flame.

He took out his diary, ink and pen, and after taking a deep breath, began to write his thoughts. There was nobody he could discuss these matters with at this hour. Even if there was, he didn't want to burden anyone with it.

As the moon travelled across the sky, Atsushi wrote page after page, pouring out his worries in the tiniest detail.

Yet he found no reassurance in writing things down, no relief from his anxiety. If anything, writing everything out in his diary had made his concerns more real.

Atsushi set the pen back in its place and pulled off his glasses, rubbing a hand over his face. He'd find no solution in this exercise. His hand felt cramped from writing, his shoulders and back ached from being hunched over the desk, and there was an intense, nauseous sensation in the pit of his stomach. Atsushi sorely wanted to crawl back into bed and curl up beside Kinshirou and fall asleep, but with the way his thoughts raced, he had no chance of sleeping.

Heavy-heated, Atsushi pressed his face into his hands and tried to still his thoughts.

"Atchan?"

Kinshirou's voice was sleepy, and his arms were warm as they slid around his shoulders.

Atsushi lifted his head, hands coming to rest on Kinshirou's arms. "Sorry, Kinchan" he uttered. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I woke and you weren't there." Kinshirou rested his chin against Atsushi's head and eyed the open diary on the desk. "You should wake me if you can't sleep."

"You looked peaceful. I didn't want to disturb you for the sake of my silly worries."

"Your worries look far from silly."

"But they are. There's no solution to them. I just have to face it."

"Perhaps so," Kinshirou broke away, leafing through the pages Atsushi had written tonight. "You may not need a solution to half of this." He closed the diary and leaned against the desk, smiling gently. "The people of Epinard will be happy to see you. I won't deny you have valid concerns, but the majority are on your side, Atchan. On our side. There may be times we must be cautious, but there will always be a thousand people to stand in our defence when a handful think of rising up against us."

"I want to find comfort in that, but I'd rather not have any uprisings at all," Atsushi sighed.

Kinshirou nodded. "It's the reality of being heir. But we're facing this together. We will always find a way forward."

Sitting back in the chair, Atsushi managed a pale smile. "You being there is my only comfort, Kinchan," he said, voice soft.

"The feeling is mutual," Kinshirou pushed away from the desk and held out his hand. "Come back to bed?"

Atsushi glanced at his diary, uncertain. "I might write a little more..."
"I miss you. Talk to me instead of your diary."

"But you're tired."

"Not too tired for you."

"Alright, I'm coming."

Extinguishing the candle, Atsushi took Kinshirou's hand and let himself be led back to bed.

His concerns couldn't be completely erased, but snuggled up beneath the covers in Kinshirou's arms, his words soon became drowsy, and his thoughts fell into soft focus.

Soon enough he'd fallen asleep, oblivious to the fingers in his hair, to Kinshirou's wakefulness.

From where he lay, Kinshirou watched the sky turn lighter. Though he'd tried to convince Atsushi that he had little to worry about, he knew that some of those concerns were very, very realistic.

Only hope and caution could ensure those things never came to pass, and as he lay there trying to sleep, Kinshirou resolved to be not only Atsushi's friend and husband, but his protector.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In the wake of Agneya's release, Ryuu and Io say their goodbyes—but not before Akoya confides in them one last time.
Now the wedding festivities are over and everything is calming down, Atsushi's thoughts turn to home.

Chapter Notes

As I was editing this, it seemed like a shorter chapter than some others, but rest assured there is more to come. Also more kinatsu fluff :3

It was Dragon Day: the day of Agneya's release from the palace cellars. The morning had passed in the blink of an eye, and now almost the entire population of the palace waited in the grounds, eager to see Agneya take her first steps into daylight.

Standing between Io and Atsushi, Ryuu rocked on his heels, eyes fixed upon the tunnel entrance through which the dragon would appear. Until recently it had been no more than a bricked up wall, but with the tunnel reopened, huge doors had been installed. They were open for the sake of the dragon's appearance, and guards stood on either side, dressed in ceremonial garb.

Ryuu shuffled closer to Io, unable to stop chewing his lip. Agneya should appear at any moment now, he was sure. He just hoped she didn't appear with a blast of flame. If he could see her in the daylight, and saw that she wouldn't hurt him, maybe he'd stop being scared of dragons. It was such a senseless fear. Agneya was the only dragon in the world. He didn't need to be afraid of her.

But that didn't stop him feeling eager to climb into Io's carriage and go home.

Io's closed his fingers around Ryuu's, and squeezed gently. He smiled when Ryuu squeezed back, and knew why he was so distracted. Fears weren't simple to eradicate. Facing them once wasn't enough. They had to be faced again and again, and even then traces of them would linger. It was easier to manage fear than it was to beat it, and Io's chest swelled with affection for Ryuu, who was so determined to manage his.

They would begin return home this evening. Their things were all packed and ready to be loaded onto the carriage, and all that was needed was for the horses to be tacked up and to take their leave of the King and Queen, and say a proper goodbye to their friends. Then they could return home to Gaia. They could announce their engagement.

Io smiled and gently rubbed the back of Ryuu's hand with his thumb. He was more eager for that than he was to see the dragon.

The other side of Ryuu, Atsushi took off his spectacles, cleaning them with his handkerchief for the umpteenth time since the crowd had gathered.
"Surely it will happen soon," he said, returning the spectacles to his face. "Akoya said it would begin when his Majesty arrived. The king has been here for some time, and he's looking a little impatient."

"But her Majesty is yet to arrive," Kinshirou pointed out softly. As he spoke, the Queen appeared, surrounded by her ladies in waiting. They were all dressed in shimmering green, and the queen's diadem featured a large emerald.

"Heh, she dressed for the occasion," Ryuu murmured, a tight smile on his lips.

"Her dress is almost the same colour as Agneya," Atsushi nodded, beginning his spectacle-cleaning all over again. "We'll see the dragon soon to compare..."

"I'm impressed by her attempt to coordinate," Kinshirou stated, mindful of the nobles nearby. Some of them would take any comment and twist it into an insult if it would benefit them, and he didn't want this conversation to be used against them. "She has taken the time to discover the exact shade of Agneya's scales, and dressed accordingly."

Atsushi paused in the act of cleaning his spectacles, and smiled slightly. "Do you think Akoya will have dressed accordingly, too?"

Kinshirou laughed. "We'll soon find out. Look."

The guards at the tunnel mouth had stood to attention, and the king and queen were taking their place on the stage before it.

"Ah, here comes the king's speech," Atsushi murmured, shoving his spectacles in his pocket and only realising his mistake when he lifted his handkerchief to his face.

"Pay attention, Atchan," Kinshirou said softly, retrieving Atsushi's spectacles and setting them in place. His fingers trailed across Atsushi's cheek as he withdrew his hands, and he smiled, fondness warming him on what had turned out to be a chilly day.

A sheepish grin formed on Atsushi's face and he caught hold of Kinshirou's hand, kissing his wedding ring. "I'm just...excited."

Kinshirou knew Atsushi had more on his mind than Agneya. Since the wedding, they'd talked a lot about their return to Epinard. They'd addressed a lot of Atsushi's anxieties over the matter, but he'd been unable to alleviate all of them. It wouldn't be long before they set off for Epinard, and Kinshirou hoped Atsushi would be more confident once he was on home soil, and could witness his subjects' support with his own eyes.

Until then, they would continue to talk over his worries, and Kinshirou could give the best counsel that he could. But for now, they had the release of a dragon to watch.

"My people!" called out the king from his stage. "We have gathered here to witness a remarkable occasion, a miracle, if you will!"

The crowd fell silent as the king began to speak, all eyes upon him—all except Ryuu's, which were fixed upon the darkness in the tunnel beyond.

"You have heard of the creature my own son found in our cellars. You have heard the fairy tales, the myths, and no doubt have laughed as I have over such ludicrous claims. Perhaps some of you laugh still. But it is foolish!"

From amongst the crowd, several people laughed nervously.
"Today," continued the king, "And with your own eyes, you will witness the miracle discovered by my son, the true jewel in Perla's crown! My people, I present to you: a living dragon."

Silence fell as the king turned to face the tunnel entrance. At first there was nothing, and there rose up soft murmurs of uncertainty, of questioning.

Then there came a quiet rumble and a series of slow, purposeful thuds that grew louder by the second.

Shapes appeared in the darkness of the tunnel, and the crowd collectively squinted at the human figures and the larger, bulkier shape that loomed behind them.

Ryuu gripped Io's arm. "Here they come," he whispered hoarsely.

Io rested a hand over Ryuu's, nodding. "The first time she's seen sunlight in a hundred years," he murmured back.

"...yeah..." Ryuu shifted closer, watching.

Akoya was the first figure to step from the shadow of the tunnel, amidst the ever louder thudding and rumbling. He beamed widely at his parents, and even wider when he saw how many had gathered to see his dragon. Then he moved to the edge of the tunnel, smile turning proud as Ibushi emerged.

Ibushi grinned back and bowed to the king and queen.

"Your majesties," he called out. "May I present to you Agneya of Argent, the last free dragon of Dragonkind!"

The king raised a hand. "Step forth, Agneya of Argent, and see that Perla is your friend!"

It was clear the exchange had been practised at the last minute. Kinshirou thought it redundant, but the king always had liked this sort of pageantry.

Yet there was no time to contemplate the point of it. Ibushi had called into the tunnel, and the ground trembled with the thudding of heavy footsteps.

Agneya's golden eyes half-closed as she stepped out of the tunnel, her scales glinting in the sunlight as she loomed over him.

The crowd gasped, some awestruck and some terrified, but none willing to be the first to run.

"Welcome, Agneya!" called out the king.

The dragon turned her head and looked to him, eyes closing as she effected what was the closest equivalent to a dragon's bow.

"S-she's pretty smart, huh..." Ryuu murmured.

"Ibushi has been training her," Kinshirou replied. "She's domesticated, so it took little work to teach her to bow to his majesty."

Atsushi smiled. "It's still impressive."

"Amazing," Io nodded in agreement. "Her scales are even more brilliant in the sunlight."

Agneya's huge form took up the entire space between the tunnel and the stage, and she looked about
herself, at all those who had gathered to see her. Then she tilted her head upwards and stretched out her wings, a hot sigh escaping her throat.

The crowd oohed and aahed as she stretched, and Akoya looked on, pleased by their reactions. They hadn't believed him, but now they had no choice. It was impossible to deny the existence of dragons when there was one right before them.

Not that Agneya would remain here forever. As soon as he and Ibushi were ready, they'd be leaving for Argent's borders, and taking Agneya with them. She was the key to breaking the curse, after all.

The only problem was, he hadn't told his father about it yet. Akoya dreaded what the king would say, and had his argument for leaving set out clearly in the back of his mind: his father had wanted him gone, so he would go, and he would break the curse upon Argent, and he would return in triumph as the first person in the modern world to make contact with the long cut-off kingdom.

Thoughts drifting back to the present, Akoya smiled at the way Ibushi spoke to Agneya. He may have called Agneya 'his' dragon, but it was Ibushi who had the real connection with her. There was no denying that Agneya was Ibushi's dragon, really.

Ibushi called out a soft instruction, and the dragon rumbled pleasantly. Then with a flap of her wings, she took off into the sky, eliciting shouts of amazement from the crowd.

Ibushi joined Akoya as he watched her fly. "Now she will show off a little," he smiled.

Together, they watched her soar.

Agneya certainly did put on a show. Silhouetted by the sun, she somersaulted and spiralled, she dived downwards and swooped back up in the last second, wings causing great gusts of wind to ruffle the crowd's clothes and mess their hair.

But the crowd were loving it. Even Ryuu was smiling.

"This is really great!" Yumoto exclaimed, popping up between Atsushi and Kinshirou. "I want to ride her when she does that!"

Atsushi laughed. "I think you'd fall off, Yumoto."

"Where have you been, anyway?" Kinshirou asked, inclining his head. "And where is En?"

"I'm here," En strolled up to them, eyes on the sky. "We've been packing."

"You've got staff for that."

"They wanted to see the dragon too."

Kinshirou frowned slightly. "But they're paid to--"

"It's nice of you to let them watch," Atsushi interrupted, not wanting the pair to argue. "Don't you think, Kinchan?" Kinshirou had always struggled to understand En's laid-back attitude, not to mention Yumoto's childlike personality. En and Yumoto, on the other hand, both thought Kinshirou needed to relax, and couldn't understand why he didn't.

"It's good to be on pleasant terms with your staff," Kinshirou agreed, albeit begrudgingly. "But you missed her arrival. Ibushi taught her to bow to the king."

"That's incredible!" Yumoto stared up at Agneya. "I really want to ride her," he whined.
Spiralling higher into the sky, Agneya let out a big burst of flame.

The crowd shouted in surprise.

Ryuu leaned against Io, his knees suddenly weak. "She's so powerful..."

Io wrapped an arm around him, attempting to make the gesture look affectionate, rather than necessary to support him. "We'll head for home as soon as possible," he whispered into Ryuu's ear.

Tucking his head into the crook of Io's neck, Ryuu squeezed him. "Thank you..."

Today was not a day for triumphing over his fears, no matter how impressive a sight Agneya was.

To many it seemed all too soon that the display of Agneya's abilities was over, but the members of the crowd were still talking about it at dinner. Akoya was pleased that Agneya was so well-received, though it didn't escape his notice that Ryuu said very little about her. As he finished his dessert, he looked hard at his cousin. Ryuu was laughing at something Yumoto had said, but his laughter and the smile that followed were too fake. It was nothing like the way Ryuu was when he was carefree.

"I must say, today's performance has guaranteed visitors to Perla for years to come," the king said, interrupting Akoya's thoughts. "And I will gladly receive any who come to look upon our dragon. My son, your discovery is a credit to this kingdom."

"Thank you, father," Akoya gave a fake smile of his own, a sense of dread lurking deep in his heart. The king wouldn't be at all happy about his plans to leave--or who he was leaving with. He'd want to keep Agneya in Perla, to attract visitors, but that simply couldn't be done.

Akoya thought about the problem after dinner, alone in his rooms. He'd wanted to practise some magic, but couldn't concentrate on it, and so had been staring blankly at the scroll in his hands for some time when the knock came at his door.

"Enter," he called out, glancing up to see who it was.

Ryuu walked in, hesitating when Akoya looked him up and down and frowned.

"Hey, Akoya..."

"You're leaving?" Akoya scrutinised his cousin's travelling garb.

Io stepped into the room. "We're needed in Gaia," he explained, an apologetic smile upon his face. "We've already taken leave of their majesties."

"We wanted to come and say bye properly," Ryuu said.

Akoya's shoulders slumped. "Oh. I'd hoped you would stay for a while. We could have gone riding together."

Ryuu pouted. "Sorry. That would have been fun."

"It would. It's been years, Ryuu."

"Come and visit us in Gaia soon, and I'll show you some great places for riding."

Akoya set his scroll aside, wrapping his arms around himself as he went to the window. "I'd like that.
But I might not be able to."

Ryuu frowned. "Why? Are you sulking because we're leaving?!"

"No?" Akoya's eyes narrowed. "You're not the only one with things you need to do, Ryuu."

"Surely you know when you have free time to visit!"

"Not when I don't know when or if I'll return home!"

"What are you talking about?" Ryuu stared in shock.

Io raised a brow. "Could you explain that?"

"Nobody knows yet, so you've got to keep it secret," Akoya sighed. "Ibushi and I are going to travel to Argent's border and break the curse. I don't know the exact day we're leaving, or how long it will take..." He swallowed. "I don't even know if we'll be successful. But I don't want to come back here having failed."

"You're an idiot, and you're way too stubborn. Who cares if you fail?" Ryuu stared at him. "Nobody believes in Argent anyway."

"I believe in Argent. If I fail to break the curse and prove its existence, I'll be the laughing stock of the kingdom."

Ryuu took in Akoya's hunched shoulders and pursed lips, and let out a sigh. "I understand," he said. "But you'll always be welcome in Gaia, right Io?"

"Right," Io gave an appeasing smile. "I'm sure Vesta would welcome you too, but Ryuu is rather adamant about living with me."

There was something in Io's tone that made Akoya pause and really look at them. The pair had always been close, and had always had some kind of unspoken connection, but as they stood there, that connection was stronger than ever. It was in the way Io spoke, in the way Ryuu looked at him, the brightness of their gazes.

And with a rush of delight, he remembered how rapidly they'd left the cellar after that first visit to the dragon, and how flushed they'd been that evening.

"...Should I expect some good news, once you've returned?" he asked softly.

As Io turned red and shuffled his feet, a shy grin crossed Ryuu's face. "Maybe. So don't leave Perla too soon, or you might miss it."

"No wonder you're so eager to return home," Akoya smiled. "I'm happy for you both. Travel safely."

"Yeah, we will. You too, when you go off on your big adventure with Ibushi," Ryuu grinned and wiggled his brows. "I'm sure it will be a huge adventure."

"Ugh, you're so immature," Akoya rolled his eyes.

"What? I said nothing!" Laughing, Ryuu held out his arms. "Do I get a hug from my cousin before I go?" He wouldn't normally ask, but thought it would soften the blow of what was to come.

Akoya blinked in surprise, then nodded and wrapped his arms around Ryuu, hugging him tightly.
"It's been good to see you, Ryuu," he said quietly. "Thank you for coming. You and Io are going to be so happy together."

"Thanks. We will," Ryuu gave his cousin a squeeze. "...You understand why I can't take your place as heir to Perla, don't you?"

Akoya froze. "You can't?"

"My home is beside Io. Governing Gaia and Vesta when the time comes will be as much work as we can manage. Besides," Ryuu pulled back, offering up a smile. "You need your own kingdom, so you and Ibushi can make your triumphant return."

Akoya was unconvinced, but smiled nonetheless. "You make a fair point, Ryuu."

"Yeah, so don't abdicate. You've got to at least try being king. I'm going to, and I'm terrified of it!"

"Well then," Akoya forced another smile. "I'll have to try too. I can't let my idiot cousin do better than me."

"I'll have you know I'm really smart!" Ryuu protested, grinning. He pulled him into another brief hug before breaking away and taking a step towards the door. "You've got some catching up to do as it is."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"I've found my prince and our forever is laid out before us. Maybe you've found yours, but you still don't think beyond the next adventure."

"I--" Akoya wanted to protest, but was struck by the thought that Ryuu was right. Before this mission to Argent, there had been the wedding. Before that, there had been freeing Ibushi. Before any of this happened, he'd only thought towards the next party, the next trip, the next new outfit, the next day out riding. Asides from the occasional contemplation of what life would bring, he'd never given much thought to his future, or what he wanted from it.

"...I'll have to catch up then," he said quietly. "And then I'll overtake you."

"Oh? Then I eagerly await the wedding invitation."

"What?! Ibushi and I are nowhere near that!" Akoya turned red, staring at his cousin.

Ryuu laughed. "I know, but it's fun to tease you."

"Ugh! You're such an idiot!" Akoya shook his head and smiled. "Stop teasing and get on your way, or you won't reach your first stop until late at night."

"Fine, I'll write you a letter and tease you that way."

"I'd rather you write to me with your good news."

"That too," Ryuu chuckled and took Io's hand. "You're right though. We have to go. It's been fun, Akoya. Let's not leave it so long next time."

Io nodded. "You're welcome in Gaia any time," he reminded him, smiling.

"Thank you. It's been good to see you both." Akoya walked them to the door, where he received a final hug from Ryuu, and a more reserved pat on the shoulder from Io.
Then they were gone, arm in arm, their voices echoing cheerfully as they disappeared down the corridor.

Akoya returned to his chair, deep in thought over his and Ryuu's last conversation.

A few days passed, and Atsushi was starting to get antsy. Though he liked the pace of life in the palace, and certainly enjoyed spending time with Kinshirou and their friends, the thought of returning home loomed over him. No matter how many times he went riding with Akoya, or talked about dragons with Ibushi, or did things with Kinshirou that husbands are expected to do, thoughts of Epinard remained ever-present in his mind.

As he lay with Kinshirou one morning, he realised why returning to Epinard lingered so much on his mind.

"I think I'm ready to go home," he murmured.

Kinshirou smiled. "Then we'll go to Epinard. If we leave tomorrow morning, we'll be in open sea by nightfall."

"With luck the winds will be in our favour, and the journey home won't take so long as the journey here..." Atsushi nuzzled Kinshirou's neck and let out a sigh. "I'll miss Perla. But I miss home, too."

"You've been gone for months."

"I never thought I'd miss everything so much. How do you bear it, Kinchan? You're rarely ever in Aurum."

Kinshirou ran his fingers through Atsushi's hair and smiled gently, something akin to sadness in his gaze. "You said it yourself, Atchan. I'm rarely there. Though I return to Aurum often, I never stay for long. I'm always sent off to other places, to meet other nobles and give them greetings from my parents. You know it's a policy for our nobles to send their children away. It teaches us independence. I've lived more of my life outside of Aurum than in it, and though it is my kingdom, I can't think of it as my home."

"That's really sad..."

"It makes it easier to leave, and I know I can always go back."

"But it isn't home..." Atsushi pouted. "Haven't you ever known how it feels to think of somewhere as home?"

Kinshirou smiled. "I feel at home right now, Atchan."

"Here in Perla? We can stay longer if you like..."

"Not Perla, though it comes close."

Atsushi peered at him. "But you just said you feel at home here."

"I feel at home with you, Atchan. Your heart shall be my home," Kinshirou said, echoing his vows of only a few days ago.

Atsushi's gaze softened. "Then I will always be with you, no matter where you are."
Kinshirou tilted his chin and kissed him gently. "Epinard will be a pleasant change of scenery."

"Are you sure?"

"Are you?"

"Yes," Atsushi smiled. "It's time to go home."

"Then I'll let your cousins and our staff know, and we can make our goodbyes."

"I suppose we should..."

Kinshirou arched a brow at his sudden reluctance. "Are you sure you're ready to go home?"

"I am! It's just that we're leaving our friends behind," Atsushi smiled ruefully. "We promised to help, but we've hardly done anything at all."

"They will be fine. Ibushi has the king's trust, and Akoya will have the respect of his kingdom eventually."

"Do you think they'll be successful? That thing with Argent-- They don't really know how to break the curse, do they?"

"Not yet." Kinshirou pursed his lips. Akoya had confided in them about his plans with Ibushi, swearing them to secrecy over the matter. "I doubt we could persuade them out of it."

"I hope they'll stay safe. What if they fail?"

"If they fail, nothing will happen. They'll return to the palace and continue their magical research until they find something else to try."

Atsushi propped himself up on one elbow. "You really think they won't be in any danger? What if the people who set the curse made it so danger befell anyone who attempted to break it?"

"Atchan, you're worrying about this too much," Kinshirou pulled him close, wrapping his arms around him. "Those people are long gone. They were so certain in the strength of their curse that they took Ibushi out of the kingdom in that mirror, like some kind of trophy of their deed. They never believed anybody would free him."

Taking a deep breath, Atsushi let it out again in a sigh. "You're right," he smiled, a little of the weight lifting from his shoulders. "You always know how to calm me down, Kinchan."

"If I didn't, I wouldn't deserve to call myself your husband."

Atsushi kissed him. "You deserve a lot more than that."

"There's more than that?" Kinshirou arched a brow.

"Mm-hm," Atsushi pressed a kiss to his jaw, his neck, his collarbones. "Much more."

"Oh I see..." Kinshirou half-closed his eyes, and let out a quiet groan as Atsushi's lips explored lower.

Travel arrangements could wait a while longer.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Akoya faces a dragon (and a few goodbyes) and Atsushi and Kinshirou are confronted with a frightening revelation that could destroy Epinard’s future.

Chapter Notes

This has been written for ages but I got sucked into writing the rest of the fic and forgot to edit/post.

Akoya raced through the fields, eyes wide, pulse racing, shirt soaked in sweat and sticking uncomfortably to his back and chest. His breath came in heavy, laboured bursts, and as he looked back he saw the dragon bearing down on him and let out a gasp of horror.

Astride the dragon, Ibushi shouted out an order.

Fire belched forth from Agneya's mouth, hot and blistering and deadly.

Skidding to a halt, Akoya threw up a shield to protect himself. The magical barrier held, but it needed to be stronger if he was going to keep this up.

Yet it was growing weaker with every attack, and he could feel the heat of the flames against his raised palms, close to scorching.

"Ibushi!" he cried out when the fire stopped. "I can't do this!"

"You can!" Ibushi called back. "Keep moving this time. Don't stop!"

As he turned Agneya around to prepare for another charge, Akoya looked down at the burnt earth and sighed. There was a perfect circle of untouched grass around his feet, protected by his bubble-shaped shield. There were similar circles all over this and the last two fields, but they were growing smaller. All this running and magic was tiring him out, yet Ibushi insisted they keep on going!

Up ahead, Agneya spiralled through the sky and let out another roar of flame into the atmosphere, her tail twitching.

Gulping, Akoya turned and fled towards the line of trees at the edge of the field. If he reached it, their training would be over.

Except Ibushi had predicted this move, and wasn't going to let him reach the trees so easily. Agneya swept overhead, a blast of flame pouring from her mouth, cutting off his path to the trees.

Cursing, Akoya threw up a shield and dodged away from the flames, and let out a yelp when Agneya's attack followed him. He had to avoid that fire. Magic shield or not, he wasn’t sure he could survive another direct attack. He was so tired...
"Giving up so easily?" Ibushi called out. He grinned down from Agneya's saddle, too much enjoyment in his face for Akoya's liking.

Scowling, Akoya shook his head. "Never!"

Ibushi laughed. "There's the Akoya I know. Determined as ever. Let's go again!"

Akoya's scowl grew deeper as Ibushi flew off again, and he looked towards the trees. He'd reach them in seconds if he was on horseback, but on foot it would take longer. His current tactic of running towards them and defending himself with his magic shield wasn't enough.

He had to think of something else.

Something Ibushi wouldn't expect.

Heart pounding in his ears, Akoya watched as the dragon swooped back up the field towards him.

If this was a real battle, he'd be dead by now. This training was hard, but he was sure Ibushi was going easy on him. Which made him a little angry. How could he fight for real if Ibushi didn't make the training real?!

Agneya flew closer, flames of warning escaping her jaws. Akoya saw Ibushi in the saddle, and had an idea.

If it worked, he'd reach the trees and the training would be over.

If it didn't work, he trusted that Ibushi would protect him from getting hurt.

Akoya took off running towards the trees, jaw clenched in determination.

Once again, Agneya overtook him and blasted fire right into his path.

But this time, he was ready.

Throwing up his shield, he ran directly towards the flames, closing his eyes to the blistering heat and wincing as his boots connected with the smouldering ground. It was hot, almost painfully so, but the flames couldn't touch him.

Then he was out the other side, back in the cool air as he continued his way to the trees. He saw Agneya fly ahead and circle back over the trees. He saw Ibushi's intention to attack again.

He kept running, hands spread to maintain the shield, and with a last burst of determination focused his attention on Ibushi and muttered a spell.

Ibushi let out a shout of surprise as he was lifted from the saddle by unseen forces. He held onto Agneya's reins to stop himself being pulled away entirely, but his hands were slipping, the magic too strong. With one final tug, Ibushi was lifted into the air, Agneya far out of reach.

The dragon, feeling the yank on her reins, promptly landed in the field, as Ibushi was unceremoniously thrown across the field and set down far more gently than he'd been pulled from the saddle.

Sitting up in the grass, he laughed.

"Nice play, Akoya, but it isn't over yet. Agneya!"
Akoya had been smirking in triumph, but the expression fell away when the dragon turned towards him. Suddenly he understood why Ryuu was so terrified of them. Agneya was huge, her fire deadly, her claws unforgiving.

And Ibushi was too far away to protect him if anything went wrong.

Throwing up his shield once more, Akoya sprinted towards the trees. His lungs burned with exertion, and he could hear the heavy thud of Agneya's steps as she lumbered after him. A glance back revealed the dragon was about to attack, but the trees were so close. He had to keep running, had to hope he could keep the shield going whilst in motion.

Flame burst around him, bouncing off the ever-weakening shield, creating a wall of fire either side of a very narrow path to the trees. In a last ditch attempt to reach it, Akoya focused on the nearest tree and spoke a spell. All at once he was drawn through the air towards it, and only just managed to utter the counter-spell in time to avoid crashing into the trunk. Letting out a groan, he collapsed against it and sank to the ground, shield fading in his exhaustion.

From the field, Agneya let out a soft sigh and sat down, tail twitching in contentment. Akoya eyed her tiredly. At least someone had enjoyed themselves.

Settled against the tree, he plucked at his sweat-soaked shirt and tried to catch his breath. All this training was important, but it was exhausting, not to mention disgusting. He hoped their mission to free Argent wasn't going to involve too much of this. Sweat felt horrible, and he hated feeling dirty and smelly. He hated feeling weak and incapable, too, and wondered how many more training sessions they'd need before he was good enough. Gora had been right that they needed to hone their magic. Of course, Ibushi had spent years learning magic before his imprisonment in the mirror, and had quickly regained all his old skills. But Akoya hadn't grown up with magic. Though his witch ancestor's blood ran through his veins, his lack of long-term training was more than evident in his sessions with Ibushi. His magic was reasonably strong, but not strong enough. He needed better tactical skill, needed to learn how to combine spells on the spur of the moment, without having to stop and think about them.

"That was impressive..." Ibushi dropped down beside him, interrupting his thoughts. "You caught me off-guard."

"Only because you were going easy on me."

"I wasn't."

Akoya tilted his head. "Seriously?"

"I knew you could do it," Ibushi grinned. "It was a surprise when you threw me out of the saddle. I didn't expect that."

A slight smile appeared on Akoya's face. "That was why I did it."

"And that's proper battle thinking," Ibushi said. "Now we can move on to something harder."

"Something harder? I'm exhausted! You must have noticed how my shield was weakening."

"I saw that. But I also saw it strengthen with your determination."

Akoya huffed. "Tell me the truth, Ibushi. Did you let me win?"

"Truthfully? No. What would you have learnt if I let you win?"
"...Was I really impressive?"

"You really were," Ibushi smiled and slipped an arm around his shoulders. "Your levitation magic is coming on in leaps and bounds, and I don't know how you made yourself fly into the trees so fast, but I want to learn that. It looks useful."

"Oh, that," Akoya leaned into him and let out a sigh. "Remember that first time I used magic in front of you, and you got mad at me? And when I slammed the door in father's face without touching it?"

"Yes. A spell that's half levitation and half--" Ibushi blinked. "You called the tree to you," he realised. "It's more firmly rooted than you, so the magic brought you to it...Huh. Be careful with that in future."

"Careful?" Akoya arched a brow. "I was careful!"

"And your great-grandfather was a witch. Your magic could grow strong enough that you might uproot the trees one day."

"Ugh. Is there anything magical that doesn't have some kind of irritating side-effect?"

"There's one thing I can think of..."

"Then teach me!"


Akoya let out a sigh as he relaxed in his hold. "I wasn't speaking figuratively," he said, carding his fingers through Ibushi's hair. "Anyway, you're wrong. That does have an irritating side-effect."

"It does?"

"Yes. I want to do it again."

Ibushi grinned, warmed by the sight of his flushed cheeks. "Is it really that irritating?"

"Yes! I'm all sweaty and I want to go inside and take a bath!"

"Shall we go back, then?"

In response, Akoya leaned in and claimed Ibushi's lips, his kiss hungry and demanding. Exhausted or not, he could always spare the energy for kisses.

By the time they parted, he was breathless for a whole different reason, and the exhaustion had left him. He felt invigorated, eager for more--but also sweaty, and it really wasn't a good feeling.

"Now we can go back," he said, shivering a little. He'd cooled down now, and the breeze felt cold through his sweat-soaked shirt.

"You're ready for that bath, hm?" Ibushi kissed his nose. "We'll continue training tomorrow, then."

"Tomorrow," Akoya agreed. He pushed himself up and dusted off his clothes. "Is it really going to get harder?"

"On a technical level, but I think you'll do well."

"Ugh. How much harder will this get, Ibushi?"
Ibushi chuckled at his disgruntled expression and jumped to his feet. "This is hard for me too, you know," he said, catching hold of his hands. "I've never taught anyone before. All I'm doing is repeating what Gora taught me."

"Gora chased you through fields on a dragon?"

"Yes. I learnt how to evade his attacks very quickly," Ibushi laughed.

"How did you do it?"

"I dodged the dragon's flames and cut the reins with my sword. It's harder to control a dragon if you can't tug on its reins."

Akoya stared at him. "Why didn't I have a sword?!"

"You didn't bring one."

"I didn't know I needed to!"

Ibushi chuckled, leading him out of the trees and toward Agneya. "Then it's fortunate that magic alone was enough this time. Next time, you might want that sword. I was always glad of mine when I trained with Gora."

For a moment Akoya walked silently alongside him, expression sullen. How could anyone do their best if they weren't properly equipped?! If things were the other way around and he were teaching Ibushi, he'd tell him to bring a sword!

As they reached Agneya, Akoya blinked in realisation, and tugged on Ibushi's hand. "You need a sword, so we'll visit the blacksmith later."

Ibushi smiled slightly. "Honestly I'm more comfortable with a bow," he confessed.

"Then we'll visit the bowyer and fletcher too, but you must have a sword, Ibushi."

"Must I?"

"Yes. Arrows are useless in hand to hand combat. Swords are better, and Perla's blacksmiths make the finest in the world."

"Argent's blacksmiths would argue with you about that," Ibushi smiled. "And I thought Aurum was most famed for its swords?"

"Aren't I allowed to be proud of my kingdom?" Akoya arched a brow.

Ibushi kissed his cheek. "You're Perla's only prince. It's your right to be proud."

Another gust of wind blew across the field, and Akoya shuddered, gritting his teeth. "...Let's go back. I'm cold and really need that bath. Come on, Ibushi."

He led the way, Ibushi quickly falling into step with him. Agneya plodded alongside them, and Akoya was glad of her presence, for warmth radiated from her body and fended off the chill of the air.

Then Ibushi wrapped an arm around his shoulders, and he began to feel warmer on the inside, too.
It was raining the day Kinshirou and Atsushi left for Epinard, and a harsh wind blew raindrops into the open porch door, causing the group that sheltered there to shiver.

"This is a great wind for sailing!" Yumoto exclaimed. He waited by the door, eager to be on the move.

"Hmph, the ship will be noisy," En muttered in reply. "All that creaking and groaning with the waves..." He fought off a yawn, the hour far too early to be thinking of travel.

"We wish you all a happy and safe journey," said the king, a friendly smile upon his face.

"Thank you, your Majesty," Kinshirou said, as he and Atsushi bowed. "It's been a pleasure to spend time in Perla, as always."

"And you are always welcome here," the queen said. "You and Atsushi both."

Atsushi smiled. "My first visit to Perla will be a treasured memory," he said.

"I'm sure it will be!" The king chuckled and offered the queen his arm. "Now I'm sure you want to say your last goodbyes. Travel safe, and fare well."

The king and queen retreated back into the palace, and Kinshirou turned to Akoya and Ibushi.

"Be careful on your quest," he said quietly.

"Be careful on yours," Akoya replied. He'd been standing with his arms wrapped around himself, but now he held them out to his friend. "And come back soon. I'll miss you."

Kinshirou smiled and embraced him. "I'll miss you too. I'll be sure to write."

The embrace was brief, and when they parted, Kinshirou shared a pointed glance with Atsushi. Then he looked to Ibushi, who had hung back from the others, and smiled. "Ibushi, it was a pleasure to meet you..."

As the pair exchanged pleasantries, Atsushi took a tentative step closer to Akoya. "Um. I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused in coming here."

Akoya was puzzled by that, confusion clear in his face. "What do you mean?"

"Our arranged marriage, all the fighting, all the tension... I'm sorry for that." Toying with his wedding ring, Atsushi took a deep breath. "But I'm not sorry I came. I made a friend in you even though I couldn't make you my husband, and you...you helped change my life for the better. So I'm sorry for all the trouble."

Akoya stared at him. "You changed my life too," he uttered, a sudden wrenching sensation in his chest. "The trouble was worth it. I'm sorry I was so unkind when you first arrived here. You've become a good friend, and I'm grateful to you."

Atsushi shuffled his feet and adjusted his spectacles, vision misting up. "You must come to Epinard, once you've finished your quest. So be careful on your travels. You don't know what might happen. But I hope you stay safe."

A lump was forming in Akoya's throat, and he swallowed hard, fighting the urge to cry. He'd known his friends would leave someday, but this felt like far too soon. There was still so much to do together, so much they didn't know about each other. He'd gained a new friend this summer. Now
that autumn was here, he was losing two of them, and the loneliness he'd felt before Atsushi's arrival was creeping back into his heart. If not for Ibushi's presence, he'd likely go back to being the selfish, lonely, bitter person he'd been before everything changed.

Atsushi sniffed, rummaging in his pockets for a handkerchief and letting out a soft laugh as he dabbed at his eyes. "Sorry, I'm being foolish. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too..." Akoya barely took a half-step closer before Atsushi had thrown his arms around him. He embraced him tightly, a faint smile on his lips and a comfortable warmth in his chest. "I...love you," he said, voice soft. "You and Kinshirou are like family to me. So stay safe." He squeezed him harder before gently pushing him back, his hands on Atsushi's shoulders. "Take good care of each other."

Atsushi smiled, teary-eyed. "We shall. You stay safe too..." he trailed off, gaze drifting to where Ibushi was looking on. "Look after him, Ibushi. He's important to me."

Ibushi smiled. "He's important to me, too..."

"And me."

Kinshirou joined Atsushi, and Akoya smiled at the fond look they shared.

"You're all important to me," he sighed, happy and aching all at once. "The palace will be quiet without you. All of you," he added, looking past the princes to where En and Yumoto waited by the door.

Yumoto bounced to attention. "We'll be back before you know it!" he beamed. "I want to meet Agneya again soon!"

Yawning, En pushed himself from where he was leaning, and ruffled Yumoto's hair. "You've got to wait for an invitation," he pointed out. "It's been fun, anyway."

"It's been memorable," Atsushi corrected, smiling.

"Really memorable..." Akoya gazed outside, and saw that the rain had stopped. Two carriages stood side by side before the palace, glistening with raindrops and laden with luggage. One bore the crest of Aurum, the other of Epinard, and their drivers waited patiently for their passengers.

And there in front of him stood Kinshirou and Atsushi, hand in hand, so perfect a couple that Akoya knew, with all his heart, that everything that had taken place over the months had been worth it. These were his friends, his brothers, and he'd protect them and their relationship with all that he had.

"We should be on our way," Kinshirou said, voice quiet and eyes suspiciously bright.

"Yes, get to your carriage before the rain starts again."

"Well then... Good bye," Kinshirou smiled, and led Atsushi to the door.

"We'll write as soon as we reach Epinard!" called Atsushi.

Akoya followed them, stopping on the threshold and curling his arms around himself as he watched the group clamber into the carriages. It was rather sweet, the way Atsushi offered his hand to help Kinshirou into Epinard's large, somewhat cumbersome carriage. In comparison, the way En more or less picked Yumoto up and tossed him into Aurum's carriage was as uncultured as Akoya had come to expect from the pair. It made him smile, nonetheless. They were free spirits, unaffected by the
propriety expected of nobility. It was enviable.

With a slam of the carriage doors and the click of hooves on the drive, the carriages were leaving. Akoya watched them go, and smiled when Atsushi and Kinshirou leaned out of the window to wave. He lifted a hand in return, willing the horses to go faster, to bear his friends out of sight quicker, so he might go inside and find distraction from the loneliness in his heart.

Ibushi's hands settled on his shoulders, and Akoya let out a sigh. For a long moment they stood in silence, watching the carriages pass through the palace gates, and gradually disappear into the distance.

Then Akoya turned to him, a little of the loneliness melting away when their eyes met.

Taking his hands, he smiled, the much-needed distraction found. "Let's get on with our training."

Days passed, and with each nautical mile the ship covered, Atsushi's nerves grew worse.

Standing out on the deck with his hands rested on the side of the ship, he looked out across the sea. A land mass loomed on the horizon, and he knew it to be home. But he feared what would be waiting for him there.

"Still worried?" En leaned beside him, ever-sleepy gaze curious. "You know you're more popular than your sister, Atchan."

"But Noriko's supporters are so fanatical..." Atsushi drew his eyes from the horizon and looked at him. "Don't tell Kinchan I'm still thinking about this."

"I don't need to. He'll know."

"I don't want him to worry. It's bad enough I've not married the person my father chose for me. I'll be in so much trouble."

"Doubt it. Your father loves Kinshirou," En nudged him. "Stop worrying about everything, it's not worth it."

Atsushi sighed. "I can't help it. There's so many things that could go wrong. But I can't talk to him about them. I've bothered him enough about my worries already."

"I'd be a terrible husband if I couldn't listen to your worries..." Kinshirou's voice was weak as he joined them, and he leaned into Atsushi's embrace the moment it was offered.

"How are you feeling?" Atsushi asked softly.

"Better, now the sea has calmed." Kinshirou rested his head against Atsushi's shoulder. "What's on your mind, Atchan?"

En grinned. "I'll leave you two alone."

Atsushi waited for him to wander off before he spoke. "I'm worried about you, Kinchan. You should be resting."

"I'm not nauseous anymore, and I needed some fresh air." Kinshirou curled an arm around Atsushi's waist. "That's Epinard out there, isn't it?" he said, looking to the horizon.
"Yes..."

"And you're worried about returning home, for all the reasons we've talked about."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"It's alright," Kinshirou kissed his cheek. "Those worries aren't the sort to disappear overnight."

Atsushi sighed. "What if it all goes wrong?"

"It won't go wrong. But if, hypothetically, it did, we would go to Aurum."

"But what if--"

Kinshirou held a finger to Atsushi's lips. "What if, instead of worrying about trials you may not face, you think about all the things we'll do together when we arrive?"

His words were calm, but his eyes betrayed his desire, and his lips curved in the slightest of smirks.

Atsushi smiled, and kissed his fingertip. "I'm happy you're feeling better, Kinchan."

"I'll be even better when we reach solid land."

"It won't be long, now..."

Arms wrapped around each other, they watched as Epinard grew closer, the ship's sails billowing above them in the wind.

It felt like forever before the ship reached the dock, and by the time they were ready to disembark, Atsushi found he was glad to be home. The air felt fresh and cool against his cheeks, and a single breath chased away the weariness of travel.

As the gangplank was let down, Atsushi offered Kinshirou his arm, and led him towards it, ready to greet the aides that rushed towards the ship.

But as they approached, he saw their mouths and noses were covered and their gazes were stricken, and they waved their hands in fear.

"Your highness, you must stay aboard!" cried the nearest aide.

Atsushi paused, one foot on the gangplank. "Whatever is going on?" he asked, heart pounding. Had his sister seized control in his absence?

"You must stay aboard!" repeated the aide. "Please remain there in safety until your carriage has been unloaded!"

"Then tell me what is happening!" Atsushi replied, frustration rising that his question had been ignored. He'd expected problems when he returned home. He just hadn't expected them to arise before he'd even set foot on Epinardian soil.

The aides exchanged glances and mumbled amongst themselves, then another stepped forward, and what he said made Atsushi's heart clench in fear.

"A most terrible thing, your highness. Epinard has fallen victim to a plague, for which no doctor has found a cure."
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Whilst Akoya and Ibushi plan to depart Perla (and Akoya plucks up the courage to tell his father), Atsushi and Kinshirou arrive at Epinard's palace, and begin to uncover the truth behind the plague that has fallen upon the kingdom.

Chapter Notes

I've finished the first draft of this fic now, so will be trying to get the final chapters posted faster than before!

Have had to cut a few chapters in half due to length, so it ended up longer than intended ^^;

It had rained overnight. The forest air was cool, and the earth smelled fresh and fragrant. As his horse Macaron plodded at a comfortable pace through the trees, Akoya took a deep breath, and let it out as a sigh.

He was alone today. Immediately after breakfast, his father had summoned Ibushi to entertain him with stories of Argent, and Akoya was sure it was a ploy to prevent them spending time together. He didn't know why their time together was such a problem. Between his magical research and Ibushi's newfound responsibilities taking care of Agneya (not to mention teaching others to do so), the most time they spent together was during their training.

Of course, there were the evenings. But lately the evenings they had alone were filled with planning their journey, and learning even more magic. Their departure for Argent loomed closer, and he was ready and not ready all at once.

All the training and learning had made him certain of his capabilities with magic. His only uncertainty was whether anything would be effective against the curse. It seemed laughable that they would break the curse on Argent's borders solely by taking Agneya there, and he'd yet to find anything useful on how to break the curse of sleep placed upon the kingdom. It had caused friction with Ibushi, too. They had been frustrated with each other far too often these past few days.

If only Kinshirou was still in Perla. He'd work out what it was they'd overlooked. He'd listen to the other troubles on his mind, too, and tell him if he was being an idiot.

Akoya missed him.

After months of the palace being so full of people, it now felt so empty, and no matter how unready he felt, the emptiness made him all the more eager to leave. Argent's curse could prove unbreakable, but it was better to be out there trying to make a difference than being stuck in the palace and feeling helpless.
New sounds reached his ears, disturbing his thoughts: the soft snort of a horse, accompanied by the heavy thump of hooves on the earth. Hooves that didn't belong to Macaron, who had pricked up her ears at the approach of another of her kind.

Akoya patted his steed's neck and drew up his shoulders. No doubt his father had sent guards to fetch him. It somehow didn't matter that he was an adult, and more than capable of taking care of himself. He was still expected to take guards with him when he went out riding. Sometimes nobody came after him, but more often than not the guards caught up, and completely ruined his peace and quiet.

Yet today it was no guard's voice that called out to him.

"Do you want to be alone, or may I join you?"

Akoya relaxed, lips curving into a gentle smile. "You're always welcome, Ibushi."

He glanced back, slowing Macaron so that he could catch up.

"I thought I'd find you out here," Ibushi said as their horses fell into step.

"I'm surprised you found me. We've never ridden this path together."

"Kinshirou told me about it, before he left," Ibushi explained. "He said if you ever run off on horseback, there's a favourite forest path you use when you want to be alone."

Akoya lowered his gaze, toying with the reins. "Kinshirou always knew where to find me. I don't want to be alone, really."

"Then what are you doing out here on your own, hm?"

"I wanted some fresh air. Wanted to ride with my thoughts for a while."

"I would have come with you."

"You were busy entertaining my father, and nobody else is here to ride out with me anymore."

Ibushi studied his expression. "You were lonely."

"I wasn't--" Akoya sighed. "I shouldn't be. I have no reason to be lonely when I have you, and my staff...and Duke Kurotori, if I was really desperate."

"The duke is always eager to please a royal, isn't he?" Ibushi remarked, not without disapproval. "Don't think that you shouldn't feel lonely. It's an emotion we all understand."

"I'm sorry, Ibushi. You must feel so lonely, being away from your family and everyone you know."

"It just means I understand that you miss your friends."

Akoya tugged on the reins, drawing Macaron to a stop. "Ibushi?"

Ibushi tilted his head questioningly as he stopped beside him. "What's on your mind?" he asked, his voice gentle and his gaze revealing nothing but concern.

In reply, Akoya leaned across, and grasped Ibushi's coat to pull him closer for a kiss. "Let's leave tomorrow," he said, resting their heads together. "It's time we freed your kingdom from its curse."
"Whenever you're ready," Ibushi murmured. "Does his majesty know?"


Ibushi lifted a hand, fingers trailing over Akoya's cheek before tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. "Do you want me to be there when you do?"

As he righted himself in the saddle, Akoya shook his head. "No. I need to do it alone, if I'm to prove I'm capable of this."

"You'll prove it, I'm sure."

"I wish I was as certain as you are. Well, there's only one way to find out."

"Does that mean you want to go back?"

Akoya smiled slightly. "Not yet. I want to stay lost in the forest with you for a little longer."

Ibushi met his smile with a grin. "Then let's get lost a little deeper, shall we?"

Atsushi and Kinshirou were met by the queen the moment they stepped inside the palace.

"Atsushi, my son!" the queen swept him into her arms, knocking her spectacles askew as she embraced him. "When I heard you were headed for home, I feared the plague would take you before I could see you again!"

"I'm home safe, mother," Atsushi smiled and hugged her tightly. It had been so long since his mother embraced him, he'd almost forgotten how it felt.

"And with a husband!" she exclaimed. "Not the one we expected, but I can't say I'm displeased." The queen stepped back, straightened her spectacles and held out her hands to Kinshirou. "It's a pleasure to have you in the palace again, Kinshirou. If only we'd known you and our boy were a match, we might never had needed to send him to Perla."

"It's a pleasure to be back, your majesty," Kinshirou replied, a polite smile upon his face. He took the queen's hands and bent to kiss them, only to find himself pulled into a warm embrace.

"We are family now," the queen chastised softly. "We don't greet each other like strangers."

"Is father angry?" Atsushi asked. The sight of his mother embracing Kinshirou was a heartening one, but he couldn't help the nervous twisting of his gut.

"He was disgruntled when he heard the news, but he's recovered from that now." With a pat to Kinshirou's back, the queen disengaged from him and placed her hands on her hips. "The bottom line is that you married, and you married well. The line of succession is secure, and at present we have far graver things to worry about."

"The plague..." Atsushi pursed his lips. "What's happening, mother? And where is father?"

"He's in a meeting, don't worry about him," the queen motioned to a room just off the entrance hall. "Let's take some refreshment, and I'll explain what has happened since you left for Perla."

Sharing a worried glance, Kinshirou and Atsushi followed her.
"It sounds as though Epinard's affairs have been busy," Kinshirou prompted, once they were seated. The queen smoothed out her skirt, gaze becoming sad. "For a start, my heretic daughter has torn the law books apart in search of a clause that allows her to claim the throne. She found nothing, of course. The throne shall be yours, Atsushi."

Atsushi nodded. "Epinard's laws are iron-clad. Akoya found that when he studied them."

"I see," the queen said. "You must tell me everything about your stay in Perla. You stopped writing, Atsushi!"

"Sorry," Atsushi bowed his head. "Life there was rather hectic. I'll tell you all about it, of course, but please, mother, tell me what's happening here. What is this plague? Where did it come from?" He looked at her expectantly, quivering inside for what terrible tales she might tell.

"It's a plague of madness," the queen sighed. "It began on the last day of summer."

"Our wedding day," Atsushi murmured. He felt Kinshirou's hand close around his and squeezed it, grateful for the silent support.

"What is the cause?" Kinshirou inquired. "What are the symptoms?"

The queen shook her head. "It's the strangest thing. It's as if all the sufferers have shared in the same hallucination, for they all have the same delusions."

"What kind of delusions?" Atsushi asked tentatively.

"Fairy tales!" exclaimed the queen, a frown upon her face. She paused whilst a servant brought in hot tea, only continuing once they were in private again--and this time, in a much lower voice. "It began in the asylums. The patients began to talk about the mythical kingdom of Argent, as if it exists! Everybody knows that if it did exist, it is long gone, washed away by the sea."

Atsushi's brows rose in surprise. "But it--"

"Is a myth, of course," Kinshirou interrupted, grip tightening on Atsushi's hand. They weren't in Perla anymore. The last thing he wanted was for Atsushi and himself to be thought mad and incarcerated.


"Of course it is," said the queen. "I'm glad you two know that. I was so worried you might fall victim to the plague on your way here." She paused, eyeing them both with suspicion, as if she knew something was amiss. "Neither of you have had dreams of a white dove recently, have you?"

The princes looked at each other, dumbfounded. Hadn't Akoya said something to them about the Magician Gora, and white doves?

Kinshirou shook his head. "If I dream of anything, your majesty, it's of your son."

"Kinchan..." Atsushi looked away, colour rising in his cheeks. To say that in front of his own mother!

The queen smiled. "That's such a sweet sentiment, Kinshirou. Atsushi, how have your dreams been of late?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Atsushi replied. Wanting to distract the attention away from himself,
he asked, "So this plague only affects the insane, and the only delusion is the belief of a myth?"

"If only it were so simple..." Seriousness returned to the queen's features, and Atsushi suddenly realised how tired she looked.

"It's worse than that?"

"Much worse. First the asylums, and then the homes of the elderly. There are old men and women telling mad stories to their grandchildren, and there are lunatics singing songs of Argent, of dragons, of magic for goodness sake! You might think, 'Well they were mad to begin with', but this delusional plague is spreading. After the lunatics and the elderly it began to take the minstrels, the artists, even the scientists! The priests are calling it the end of times, the academics are arguing amongst themselves about whether any of these things might ever have existed, and just yesterday, my own favourite lady in waiting was also taken!" There were tears in the queen's eyes, but she did not let them fall. Instead she took a deep breath, gathering herself. "I tried to talk sense into her, of course," she said, calmer than before. "I showed her the oldest books and maps I could find, to prove that Argent was no more than a seafarer's tale, and that dragons and magic were simply things our ancestors had not the understanding to explain. But she was too badly taken by the plague, and I had to send her home before anyone else fell to it."

"That must have been very difficult," Kinshirou said softly.

"Try not to be sad, mother," Atsushi murmured, shifting to kneel beside her. "They're only having dreams. So long as they don't hurt themselves or other people, they can still be safe and happy."

A faint smile rose on the queen's lips, and she ruffled Atsushi's hair. "You're a good boy, Atsushi," she said quietly. "Always looking for the light in the deepest darkness."

Kinshirou cleared his throat. "With the permission of your majesties, I'd like to investigate this matter," he said. "I have never heard of such a curious plague. There must be some cause to it that can be stopped. I'm sure that Atsushi and I can get to the bottom of this."

"Absolutely not!" The queen stared at him in horror. "The two of you must remain within the palace, where it is safe!"

Atsushi blinked. "But mother, I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation. Kinshirou and I won't be struck down by any kind of madness."

"My word is final--as is your father's." With a swish of her skirt, the queen rose to her feet. "Come, I'll show you to your marital apartment. Your things will have been unpacked by now."

Kinshirou slipped his hand into Atsushi's as they followed her, and shot him a worried glance. He had a few ideas about why these people had been struck by this mysterious plague, but the palace wasn't the safest place to discuss them.

Akoya didn't summon up the courage to speak to his father until lunchtime, and even then the king wouldn't grant him a private audience until later that afternoon.

Waiting was nerve-wracking, and no amount of kisses stolen in the shadow of Agneya's slumbering form could keep his mind off what the afternoon would bring.

Though he had his arguments all laid out in his mind, there was no telling whether his father would consent or threaten to throw him into the dungeon on grounds of lunacy.
Finally the time came. With a churning stomach and feet that felt ten times heavier than normal, Akoya went to his father's audience chamber. He'd worried that his father might make him wait - the king did that often - but the aide led him straight in, and discreetly withdrew from the room with the other staff once the king had bidden Akoya to sit.

"Well then, son!" The king beheld him with a slight frown. "What is so important that you couldn't have brought it up over lunch?"

"Father, I want to--No, that isn't right." Akoya shook his head and took a deep breath. This wasn't how he'd intended the conversation to go. He'd already messed up his opening speech! "What I mean to say is, as you know the existence of Argent has been more or less proven, and most likely lies on our very own borders, trapped under curse so nobody can get in or out. I--"

"Yes, I know this, the whole palace knows about this idea of Argent. Not that they all believe in it, of course. But what about it?"

Akoya's temper flared at the interruption, and he took another deep breath, fighting the urge to start shouting. "I intend to break that curse."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"I acquired a scroll with useful information. It's the key to breaking Argent's curse."

The king stared at him. "Son, you have tired me out with your talk of magic and curses. Yet you've shown me magic, and you've shown me a damn dragon, so I have no choice but to believe you. And so I want you to answer me this: why haven't you broken the damn curse already?!"

"I'm going to as soon as possible, father."

"And I must ask you how?"

Akoya sat up straighter in the chair, and did his best to look him in the eye. "I'm leaving for the border tomorrow," he said. "I'll be taking Ibushi and Agneya with me."

After a moment of stunned silence, the king let out a laugh. "You'll take the boy and the dragon, hm? What use is a dragon against a curse? How will you transport her to this supposedly cursed border? The roads aren't suitable for a dragon."

"Agneya is essential for breaking the curse, as set out in the scroll I read. Ibushi and I shall ride her there. It will be much faster than travelling by horse."

"What do you intend to do when you fail?"

"If I fail, I will keep trying," Akoya replied, narrowing his eyes.

"And if you're successful?"

"Then I return to the palace in triumph, the first delegate from a foreign kingdom to make contact with Argent in over a century."

The king sat back in his chair. "You've thought hard about this."

"Of course. I wouldn't even consider it without planning out every detail."

"Yet you still come to me, knowing that if I said no, you would be barred from leaving the palace grounds," the king eyed him. "You come to me with an idea straight from a fairytale, something so
hard to believe that the palace would laugh at you—*the kingdom* would laugh at you. Which is something that I cannot accept."

Akoya's shoulders slumped. Was his father really forbidding him to go? If so, he'd have to sneak out at night instead. Perla hadn't the technology to stop a dragon in flight.

He sat there, a lump forming in his throat as his father continued to go on about things like reputation, and danger, and the future. He bit his lip as the words began to calm, waiting for the king's final words of prohibition.

"...and so you must understand you will have no farewell party, nor shall any come to wave you goodbye. As far as the kingdom shall be concerned, you have gone travelling."

Akoya paused at that, then leaned forward in his seat, eyes wide. "I can go?"

"You can do what you want," the king shrugged and let out a sigh. "Just remember that your actions reflect upon Perla. I don't want another scandal like we had with Atsushi."

"There won't be. I'll be successful, father."

"Then I shall look forward to your triumphant return." The king rose to his feet, an indication that their meeting was over. "...Come back safely, son," he said, as Akoya rose. Then he cleared his throat. "If you intend to leave tomorrow, you'd best go and make the arrangements. It's about time you went out into the world."

"Y-yes, father. Thank you," Akoya bowed quickly, and almost ran from the room, unable to keep the grin off his face.

He had to find Ibushi, and tell him the good news. Their plan was in motion, and he had no intention of letting another moment go to waste.

Ibushi barely slept that night. He was wide awake before dawn, washed and dressed and checking over his travelling pack one more time. With Argent still locked away from the world, his pack more or less contained all of his possessions. The only garment he left in his wardrobe was the formal garb he'd worn to Kinshirou and Atsushi's wedding, which hung there spotless and free of creases, with no indication that he'd passed the night in it at Akoya's side. Between that and the items he was wearing, he didn't have many other clothes. But those he did have were stowed away in his pack, along with his half of the provisions, plus a map and a few books that Akoya apparently didn't have space for.

As he paced up and down the room, waiting for the sun to break over the horizon, he thought over the journey to come.

By dragon, it would only take a day and a half to reach the mountains. Once they'd broken the curse on Argent's border, it would take only half a day, by dragon, to fly over the mountains and reach Argent itself. From there...

Ibushi took a deep breath, not liking the way his stomach clenched at the thought.

From the mountains, they could ride to the palace in a day. Then they could finally break this curse, and he'd have his kingdom back—he'd have his *family* back, and everything he'd known before his imprisonment.
If Akoya was able to break those curses as simply as he'd broken the mirror curse, Ibushi realised, he could be face to face with his parents in three days time.

When that happened, he would have so much to tell them, and Argent would have so much catching up to do with the rest of the world. Returning to Argent was going to be like taking a step back in time. The kingdom was once at the forefront of advancement, but was now so far behind. Ibushi had no doubt that Argent could easily catch up with modern technology. What he wasn't so sure of was whether breaking its curse would be as easy.

Finally the sun peeked over the horizon, bright and golden and promising a day of good weather.

Ibushi picked up his newly-forged sword and gathered his bow and quiver (with a silent thanks to all the craftspeople who had worked so hard to make them at short notice). Then he shouldered his pack and left the room, his footsteps light and eager.

Awakening at first light, Akoya took his time in rising, aware that this could be his last chance in a while to enjoy such luxuries as a big bath and imported oils.

Despite the comfort of his bed and the revitalising scent of his bath oils, he felt tired, having spent too long awake last night. His mind still reeled with the thoughts that had kept him awake: a mental list of the spells he would try against the border if Agneya's presence alone wasn't enough, and ideas about how he might break the sleeping curse. He wanted to believe he could do it, and based on his brief meeting with the Magician Gora, he knew it ought to be possible. Yet doubt crept in, along with a fear that he might never be able to show his face within the kingdom again if he failed.

His father expected him to fail.

Not that it mattered what his father thought (or so he told himself). But if he failed, his father would be unbearable. If he failed, he didn't know what he'd do. His only choice was to keep trying until he achieved either success or death, and he didn't particularly like the prospect of the latter.

When he at last emerged from the bathroom, golden sunlight was filtering into the bedroom, coming to rest on his over-stuffed travelling pack. Akoya pouted at it, second-guessing his packing choices for the umpteenth time. But he hadn't time to change anything now. Ibushi would be outside, waiting with Agneya.

Akoya dressed quickly, fighting against the instinct to spend ages trying on different outfits before the mirror until he looked as good as possible. Ibushi had seen him in all kinds of states, he reminded himself. His regular travelling clothes were fine.

Still, he did stop before the mirror one last time, to braid his hair. Ibushi liked it like that, and besides, it was more practical for travelling.

Then there was nothing else left to do.

Akoya looked around his room, taking in the sight of all the things he was leaving behind: his writing box, his jewels, his lotions; his hair ribbons, his accessories and his favourite slippers.

As an afterthought, he took his personal seal from his writing box and slipped it into his pocket. It was unlikely that he'd need it, but it felt important. It held memories.

Then, more heavy-hearted than he expected, he hefted up his pack and took up his rapier. The ornately-decorated weapon was the one luxury he was allowing himself. It was a gift from
Kinshirou, and the best quality weapon he owned. He smiled faintly as he belted it on, briefly lost in the memories of receiving it, and all that had followed.

Then, with one final glance around the room, he straightened his shoulders and strode away, head held high.

The king had been right that there would be nobody to wave them goodbye. Meeting Ibushi and Agneya at the entrance to the dragon’s tunnel, Akoya found they were the only ones there. It felt lonely, the early morning silent and chilly, and all at once his excitement at travelling gave way to nerves.

"Are you ready?" Ibushi eased the pack from his shoulder, and fastened it onto Agneya's saddle with his own.

Akoya took a deep breath, and looked up at the palace. Then he looked at Ibushi, who was dressed in new travelling clothes that fit in all the right places, and was smiling in a gentle, tender manner.

The knot of nerves in his stomach unravelled a little, and he smiled back and stepped in close so he could steal a kiss. It felt soft and languid, and he could easily have let himself forget about their task, and put it off in favour of being here, together.

But their journey loomed ahead of them, and it was a million times more important than his desire for more kisses.

So he drew back and let out a quiet sigh.

"Yes, I'm ready," he whispered.

Ibushi rested his head against Akoya’s, linking hands with him. "Are you sure?"

His question was tentative, as though he knew of his uncertainty.

Clearing his throat, Akoya took a step back. "Yes, I'm sure. Let's get on our way before the morning is over."

Ibushi looked at him as though he wasn't convinced, but he said nothing more about it.

They climbed onto Agneya's back, Akoya at the front with Ibushi tantalisingly close behind, reaching around him to grasp the reins.

Agneya let out a pleased rumble and stretched her wings, and with a word from Ibushi, took to the sky.

Akoya let out a sigh, keeping his eyes fixed ahead. He couldn't bear to look back at the palace, which had been both a home and a prison for so long.

Then there came a shout from the ground.

"Akoya!"

Biting his lip, Akoya pretended not to hear.

Ibushi raised a brow, tugging on the reins to have Agneya circle around above the tunnel mouth. "Are you not going to acknowledge your father?" he asked.
Akoya huffed and looked down to where the king stood, bleary-eyed beside the queen. Some way behind stood Zundar and the rest of his personal staff, and the sight made Akoya's breath hitch, his eyes stinging with unexpected tears.

The king raised a hand. "Did you think you could sneak out without taking leave of me?" he demanded, smiling.

Gulping, Akoya shook his head. "Forgive me," he called back. "I didn't want to disturb you at this early hour."

"Nonsense! Your mother and I must be here to bid you farewell!"

"Yes, dear," called the queen. "Travel safely now!"

"And remember, you represent the whole of Perla!" the king added. "Be gone, my son, and travel well!"

"Goodbye..." Akoya spoke it too softly for his parents to hear, and when he waved, it was to his staff rather than the king and queen.

Then he turned his head away, glad that Ibushi had taken the king's words as a dismissal and eased Agneya back onto her flight path.

"Are you alright?" Ibushi asked quietly, as the dragon swooped over the castle turrets.

"I'm fine," Akoya lied. "I just didn't expect a farewell. Father told me nobody would be there."

"It was a surprise..." Transferring the reins to one hand, Ibushi wrapped his free arm around him. "They care, even if they're not good at showing it."

Eyes closed, Akoya swallowed the lump in his throat and leaned back against his chest, comforted by his warmth. "Maybe. It doesn't matter. It's just us now."

"Just us..." Ibushi echoed the words softly as he hooked his chin over his shoulder.

Together, they looked into the distance. The mountains weren't yet visible, but they were there somewhere, beyond the horizon. And beyond the mountains was Argent, hidden behind a curse that neither was certain could be broken.

All they could do was go there and find out, and hope that their fears were proven wrong.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

As Kinshirou and Atsushi attempt to escape the confines of the palace, Ibushi has some serious concerns about Agneya (and a slightly smaller concern of how he's going to tell Akoya they're sleeping outside tonight). But danger lurks just around the corner, and Ibushi could never have predicted what was to come.

(Alternate summary: Dragons, danger, En's terrible flirting, and an even worse escape plot!)

Chapter Notes

Am I posting these chapters too often?

I wanted to get the last chapters posted by the end of the year...

They had been flying for hours. The mountains had yet to appear, but the palace had disappeared from sight long ago.

Ibushi scowled at the horizon, willing the mountains to materialise and wishing Agneya would fly faster. But the dragon could only go so fast, and would only fly so far without needing to stop and rest.

He was starting to worry about her. They'd already stopped twice, and he'd fed her, and let her rest whilst he and Akoya sat down to eat something. Yet three hours later and Agneya's energy was already starting to flag again. The soft, steady flap of her wings had become lethargic, and her rumbling words were full of complaint about how tired she was, and how she longed to find a good cave and settle.

Ibushi murmured back to her softly, promising that they would rest with the sun, and she could have the whole night to slumber. The dragon let out a hot huff at that, and began to fly faster.

"What is she saying?" Akoya asked, suppressing a yawn. Riding a dragon was surprisingly tiring, considering all he had done was sit in the saddle and hang on.

"She's tired and wants to rest."

"So why don't we rest for a while? I'm tired, too."

"We'll rest at sundown."

"Ibushi, the sun won't set for ages..." Akoya shifted uncomfortably. "I can't wait that long."

Giving the reins a flick, Ibushi encouraged Agneya onward. "It's only a few more hours," he said. The mountains were almost in sight, he was sure of it. He was tired too, but there was still so much
left of the day, and he didn't want to stop until he could see the mountains. That was one step closer
to seeing his home.

"I...um..." Akoya cleared his throat, fidgeting more as his cheeks began to burn. "I need to take a
break, Ibushi," he said. "I drank a lot of water at lunch."

"Ah," Ibushi smirked slightly at the embarrassment in his voice, and pressed a kiss to his shoulder.
"We'll take a short break, then." He called out a command to Agneya, and as she swooped gratefully
towards the ground, he reminded himself that a brief rest stop wasn't going to hold them up too long.

They would reach the mountains. Whether today, whether tomorrow, whether the day after that, they
would get there. Agneya's presence would break the curse on the border, and then he could finally
get back into Argent. A short break didn't matter, and everything would be fine.

Akoya was glad to take another break. He ached from sitting on Agneya's back, his legs sweaty from
her warmth. Despite her body heat, the air had been cold at the height they had been flying, and it
had taken a lot of concentration not to shiver at the chill of the breeze. He wished he'd learnt spells
for creating warmth, and was sure he'd seen one in one of the books he'd brought along. So once he
was comfortable again, he rummaged in his pack and took out a slim volume bound in cracked
brown leather, and leafed through it.

"What are you doing?" Ibushi asked. He stood at Agneya's side whilst the dragon nosed dozily
through the undergrowth, and kept one eye on her as he turned the rest of his attention onto Akoya.

"I want a heat spell. It's cold up in the air."

"You could just put on another layer."

Akoya blinked at him. "But layers are cumbersome, and I need to practise my magic..."

Ibushi crossed his arms. "Have you found a way to break Argent's curse?"

"Not yet, but I will."

"So put on another layer, and look for that instead of worrying about heat spells."

Frowning at the harshly-spoken words, Akoya turned another page. "If I freeze to death, I can't
break the curse."

"I won't let you freeze to death, Akoya."

"Of course not, because you need me to break the curse on your kingdom."

The reply was petulant, making Ibushi wince.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to snap at you."

"Then what did you mean?" Akoya demanded, not looking up from the book. It hurt that Ibushi had
taken such a harsh tone with him. He'd abandoned everything he knew for Ibushi's sake, yet Ibushi
couldn't spare him a few moments to find a spell and work it so they could stay warm whilst flying!
What use was a spell to break a curse if they were frozen to death before they could work it?!

Ibushi sighed. "We've stopped several times today, and the mountains are still out of sight. Now
we're on this quest, I'm impatient to get it over with."

"None of that is my fault." Akoya pouted as he leafed through the pages. In the back of his mind, he
remembered having a fight with Kinshirou over something seemingly ridiculous, and how Ibushi had told him to treat him with kindness. He hadn't known, then, why Kinshirou had been so harsh. He didn't really understand why Ibushi had spoken so harshly, either.

Looking up from the book, he studied him, taking in the furrow of Ibushi's brow, the way he paced back and forth at Agneya's side.

"...Are you alright, Ibushi?"

Ibushi grimaced, pushing his hands through his hair. "No. It's unlike a dragon to need to stop so often. This is a bad sign."

"Is she sick?" Akoya closed the book. This was more important now.

"She isn't sick. She's in good health," Ibushi shook his head. "It's a bad sign because Agneya is a magical creature."

"I don't understand..."

"What if all these stops are the curse working to hold us back?"

"Or maybe she's tired. After sleeping for a hundred years, it must be hard for her to fly across a kingdom in a day."

Agneya rumbled softly, and Ibushi's frown deepened. "It isn't that," he said, patting her flank. "But think about it. Don't you think it's too convenient, how easily everything has fallen into place?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you freed me, and you found Agneya. Then she woke up..."
"And Yumoto and En met Gora and brought him to Perla, and he gave us the scroll we needed," Akoya nodded, catching on. "But my father caused us problems, and I barely know any of the magic I might need, and the scroll proved itself useless. That wasn't so convenient."

"You're right..." Ibushi rubbed a hand over his eyes, starting to feel tired. "Perhaps I'm overthinking."

"Perhaps..." Walking closer, Akoya wrapped his arms around him. "But perhaps we ought to be on our guard, too."

Ibushi pulled him closer and pressed a kiss to his forehead, frown easing. "That's what the training was for," he reminded him.

"In case we encounter unfriendly magic," Akoya leaned in, stealing a soft kiss. "Is Agneya ready to continue? We should make some more progress before we stop for the night."

Agneya rumbled again, drawing her head out of the undergrowth and looking at them as though she understood what they were saying.

"She's ready," Ibushi translated.

"Great, let's get on our way."

"Didn't you want to find a heat spell?"

Akoya shook his head. "I'll put on another layer. It's quicker, and we need to make better progress.
I'd like to see the mountains before we stop for the night."

"Me too." Ibushi smiled faintly, and together they gathered their things, ready for another leg of their journey.

Epinard was beautiful in the autumn. It was beautiful in all seasons, but it was in autumn that the warm nature of its people was shown through the reds and golds of the trees and fields.

Seated at the window, Kinshirou gazed out at the scenery. There was a book in his lap, but he'd long been distracted from it, too lost in thought to concentrate.

The so-called plague of madness in Epinard bothered him. He knew it was no plague. It was too strange to be a sickness, too coincidental considering all that had happened in Perla.

All those dreams of doves and stories of Argent weren't signs of madness.

It was a sign that magic was awakening. The world was preparing itself for Argent's return.

But if Argent really proved to be there, if its borders with the world were opened once again, how would the kingdom cope? Argent was stuck a century in the past. The world had advanced so much that it denied magic, denied dragons, denied all that Argent was. To the rest of the world, Argent would be a heathen state, old-fashioned and weak, and ripe for invasion if it couldn't defend itself.

Kinshirou frowned and closed his book. If this was to be avoided, the world would have to accept Argent for what it was. For the world to accept Argent, it had to accept the existence of magic.

Right now, the only kingdom that acknowledged magic was Perla, and its study of the subject was currently a closely-guarded secret.

It was a start, but it wasn't enough.

Rising to his feet, Kinshirou looked out across the picturesque town below the palace, and back to the golden fields beyond. There were people in Epinard who believed in magic, and in Argent. They just needed to be listened to.

"Kinchan?" Atsushi stepped into the room, brows knit in concern when he saw the pensive stare on his husband's face. "Is something wrong?"

As he turned from the window, the pensiveness disappeared from Kinshirou's gaze, his features softening. "I was lost in thought. How did the meeting with your father go?"

Atsushi's shoulders slumped. "He refused. We're stuck here."

"Despite your reasoning?"

"Yes. As heir to the throne I'm now too valuable to risk being exposed to the plague. It has been officially named the Dove Sickness, by the way." Atsushi's hands clenched. "He wouldn't listen. He's usually so reasonable, but wouldn't hear of us going about our lives as normal. Our marital tour is postponed until a cure is found, and we're forbidden from setting foot outside the palace."

"Even though the staff come and go, and food and supplies are brought in on a daily basis?"

"Despite that, yes."
Abandoning his book on the window sill, Kinshirou crossed the room and took Atsushi's hands in his. "We'll find a way around this."

"I hope so." Letting out a sigh, Atsushi squeezed his hands. "What were you thinking about, before I came back? You looked troubled."

Kinshirou glanced back to the window, frown returning. "If Akoya and Ibushi are successful in their quest, the world won't be ready for..." He paused, reconsidering. "Perla will be ready, maybe. They have a tentative acceptance of the truth. But the rest of the world isn't ready for Argent." Kinshirou spoke quietly, not wanting to be overheard. Though there should be no staff in their apartment at this time of day, there was no guarantee that somebody wouldn't be eavesdropping. Epinard was caught in a time of sickness and fear--and fear led to mistrust, even of one's own family.

Atsushi pursed his lips at his words, and nodded. "I wish you weren't right," he murmured. "What can we do, Kinchan? The entire kingdom would have to believe, in order to be ready."

Kinshirou shook his head. "The King of Perla was convinced upon seeing Agneya, being shown magic, and being presented with hard evidence of Argent's existence. We don't have those things here."

"That's it!" Atsushi straightened, a little of the stress leaving his face as his eyes widened. "Epinard has vaults full of old documents. There must be something there. And...I bet if we collected up the stories of everyone with the Dove Sickness, they would all say the same things."

"Wouldn't that be refuted as a symptom of the plague?"

"How could it be? Have you ever heard of any illness that turns people mad and makes them believe what these people believe?"

"Never," Kinshirou shook his head. "Madness stems from old age, extreme trauma, or diseases of the brain, and the associated delusions are never concurrent between all sufferers. This Dove Sickness is new, and no matter how I think about it, I can't believe it's a real medical condition."

"It's magic," Atsushi said, voice soft. "I think we need to listen to those people, Kinchan. Somehow, we need to make the world believe."

Kinshirou nodded. "We just need to work out how we can listen to them."

They fell quiet, becoming lost in thought as they considered it. Getting out of the palace had been high on their agenda from the moment they arrived, yet was completely out of the question. Epinard's palace was like a fortress at times like these, having withstood many wars in times long past. It was impossible to get in or out without the king's permission.

Atsushi's heart grew warm as he remembered the first time Kinshirou had come to stay at the palace. They became firm friends almost immediately, and within a week had begun to plot a night-time escape in order to go into the town and visit a proper tavern. It hadn't occurred to them that they were too young to be served there, or that they were both instantly recognisable. Still, it had been fun to try and escape the guards sent after them, and nobody ever did discover how they snuck out.

"That's a nice smile for such a troubling time." Kinshirou's voice, gentle and curious, brought Atsushi's thoughts back to the present. "What are you thinking about, Atchan?"

Atsushi smiled. They were just kids back then, and it might be harder as adults, but it was worth a try. "I think I know how we can escape for a while," he said. Kinshirou's brows rose in question, and he continued. "Remember the first time you visited, and we went to that tavern?"
"You mean to get out that way?" Kinshirou stared. "Do you think we'll fit?"

"It's worth a try, isn't it?" Atsushi grinned, a thrill in his chest at the thought of it.

"We must ensure we aren't caught, this time."

"I think Enchan can help with that."

The couple shared a smile. The flaw in their childhood plan had been the lack of a lookout and decoy. This time, they had a far greater chance of success.

As it happened, Akoya didn't notice the mountains when they first appeared on the horizon. He'd been focused on his book, confident that Ibushi wouldn't let him fall off, and practicing the occasional spell as they flew onwards.

Ibushi noticed the mountains. He'd been staring at the horizon for hours, and when the huge, jagged rocks first appeared in the distance, he had to blink at few times to confirm to himself that he was really seeing them. Breath catching in his throat, he gave Akoya a squeeze. "There they are," he said softly.

Lifting his gaze, Akoya beheld the mountains. He'd never thought about them much before meeting Ibushi. They'd been an impassable wall of rock, an inconvenience and nothing more. Yet at this moment in time they presented a looming challenge, a test of his magic. He would either pass, in which case their journey could continue, or he would fail. Failure wasn't an option he wanted to consider, but if merely taking Agneya to the border wasn't enough to break the curse, failure was the most likely outcome.

"Will we reach them tonight?" Akoya wondered, squinting at the bright patch where the sun lurked behind the clouds. It was a lot lower than the last time he'd looked.

"Not tonight. At this pace, we should reach them before lunch tomorrow, provided we set off early."

"Then we should all rest well tonight."

"We'll find a place to land when the sun sets," Ibushi promised, sensing that he was tired and wanted to stop.

"Mm, a nice coaching inn, or a hotel... I'd even settle for a farmhouse tonight," Akoya yawned.

"That would be nice," Ibushi agreed, noncommittal. They'd passed the last sign of civilization hours ago, and the landscape now was full of dense forest and rolling hills. He hadn't for one moment expected to sleep in an actual bed on this journey, but it seemed Akoya's expectations were vastly different. Ibushi decided to wait until sunset before he told him they would be sleeping outside.

As Akoya resumed reading, Ibushi fixed his gaze upon the mountains and murmured to Agneya that they were almost there. It seemed to spur the dragon on, for she began to fly faster, as if her energy had been renewed.

Yet the mountains hung there in the distance, seeming to get further away with each flap of Agneya's wings, and the sun sank lower and lower, the clouds too dense for a sunset, only a gradual darkening of the sky.

Ibushi encouraged Agneya onward, determined not to stop until it was too dark to see. Just in front
of him, Akoya let out a soft huff.

"It's too dark to read anymore..."
"We'll go just a little further."

"Hmph, alright." Raising a hand, Akoya muttered a few words. A little ball of light appeared at his fingertips, then rose to hover above them.

"I didn't know you could summon light," Ibushi said. "When did you learn that?"

"Earlier, but I couldn't practise until now. It wasn't dark enough." Pleased with himself, Akoya leaned back against Ibushi's chest and continued to read.

Ibushi squinted into the darkening sky. The only problem with the bright light above them was that it made the rest of the landscape harder to see.

"Don't tire yourself out with all the magic," he said softly. "We've still got some way to go."

"We should find somewhere to stop, soon."

"Just a little further."

"You said that ages ago." Akoya rested a hand over Ibushi's on the reins. "Don't tire yourself out either, Ibushi."

Ibushi had to admit he was tired. His eyes hurt from staring into the distance, and his body ached from spending so long riding. He was hungry, too, and didn't doubt that Akoya and Agneya were feeling much the same.

"Alright," he said, the thought of food and a good rest becoming too much to resist. "We'll land as soon as we find a place to stop."

They found the clearing only moments before sundown. Agneya landed with a heavy thud of powerful feet, and immediately started chomping on the undergrowth.

"This looks good enough," Ibushi said, looking around by the light of Akoya's spell. "We'll unload the saddle and make dinner. Then we'd better sleep, so we can rise with the sun and be on our way."

Akoya raised a brow. "Where are we going to sleep?" He waved his hands around the clearing. "Because this isn't suitable."

"It's the best we can expect, in the middle of Perla's great forest," Ibushi said, privately hoping Akoya wasn't going to get angry.

"But there's bugs, and wild animals, and..." Akoya shuddered, gritting his teeth and pulling his coat closer around himself. "...There's really no choice?"

"Afraid not. Is it a problem?" Ibushi tilted his head.

Akoya turned his head away and began walking back and forth. "No. I-I just haven't slept outside before, that's all. If I'd known, I would have brought a tent, and five blankets instead of one! And a pillow!"

"You'll be okay," Ibushi said, recognising his behaviour as nervousness. "We have everything we need."
"...Really?"

"Trust me."

"I...I do, but..." Akoya sighed, accepting that he had no choice. "Alright."

It wasn't until they decided to turn in for the night that he understood what Ibushi meant by having everything they needed. As the campfire burned low, Agneya settled down on the ground, wings stretched out comfortably and her tail curled around to her nose.

"Come on," Ibushi grabbed his pack and climbed over her tail, motioning for Akoya to follow.

Akoya glanced at the dragon dubiously, then grabbed his things, hurrying after him just as Ibushi ducked under Agneya's wing.

Ibushi was setting out a sleeping mat, and signalled upwards when Akoya joined him. "We have shelter," he said, motioning to the wing. He patted Agneya's flank. "And we have warmth--and protection," he nodded towards her head, and Akoya turned to see she was watching them, golden eyes calm.

"But we don't have pillows," Akoya pointed out.

"Your pack is your pillow. Come on." Setting their packs together, Ibushi flopped down on the sleeping mat and patted the space beside him.

Akoya let out a quiet sigh and settled down, not entirely happy. He had no problem sleeping so close to Ibushi, but sleeping out in the open wasn't high on his list of joyful experiences.

"Are you sure this is alright?" he asked. "What if Agneya's wings get stiff overnight?"

"They won't," Ibushi pulled him closer and tugged a blanket over them. "This is natural for a dragon. This is how she would protect her young at night..."

"Does she think of us as her young?"

"Well, we are much younger and smaller than her."

Akoya smiled slightly, closing his eyes. "Tell me more about dragons, Ibushi..." He doubted he'd fall asleep easily tonight, but Ibushi's voice was always soothing. He could rest for a while, even if he didn't sleep.

"Hm, where should I begin?"

"Anywhere. Right here, maybe."

Feeling Akoya's face press against his neck, Ibushi squeezed him. "Right here? Protective instincts of dragons for their young, then. All dragons have that instinct, regardless of gender, though mother dragons are more commonly known to shelter their young like this..."

He talked for a while, rattling off any kind of random dragon fact that sprang to mind. When Akoya's breath began to fall calm and even against his skin, he trailed off and smiled, knowing him to be sleeping.

Tired yet too alert to sleep, Ibushi craned his neck to look at Agneya. He could just about see her face by the moonlight, and she looked back with a weary eye and let out a soft grumble.
"Alright," he replied quietly. "I'm going to sleep."

He shut his eyes to the sound of a relaxed sigh, and lay there thinking for a while. Agneya's weariness today had been worrying. At the palace, she had been so youthful and full of energy. Yet on this journey, with her lethargy and need to stop and eat so often, she was behaving more like an old dragon. Which she wasn't. Not compared to some of the dragons Ibushi had known back in Argent. There was only one other conceivable reason a female dragon would need to stop and rest and eat and relieve herself so often, and that was--

Ibushi opened his eyes and looked at Agneya. Her eyes were closed, and she looked peaceful.

Shaking his head at himself, Ibushi shut his eyes again. No, it was impossible for that to be true. Agneya had been asleep for a hundred years, and there were no male dragons around. Akoya was right. The reason Agneya was tired was simply a matter of being in poor physical condition following her long sleep.

Still pondering the matter, Ibushi drifted into the world of dreams.

Upon hearing of Kinshirou and Atsushi's escape plot - to slide down the old laundry chute in Atsushi's childhood bedroom and sneak out of the servants entrance - En laughed.

"Too much effort, and you'd get stuck," he said. "There's a better way."

Atsushi didn't waste time arguing, instead looked at his cousin pleadingly. "Show us."

"Come on then."

En led them through the palace at a meandering pace, stopping occasionally to look at a portrait or gaze out of the window. Kinshirou found the slow progress maddening, and only held back from saying anything because Atsushi's hand was rested comfortably in the crook of his elbow, and he was leaning against him slightly. That, at least, was pleasant. Resting his hand over Atsushi's, Kinshirou continued to follow, and wondered what En had in mind.

Eventually they reached the ground floor, where En's wandering led them to the door into the service area.

"We can't go in there!" Atsushi hissed, seeing that his cousin was about to open the door.

En raised a brow at him. "You're the future king, Atchan. You can go anywhere you want."

"Except outside," Kinshirou pointed out.

En grinned and opened the door, prompting a gasp from the maid inside.

"Your grace!" she exclaimed. Her face turned pink when she saw the princes behind En and she curtseyed, lowering her gaze. "And your highnesses! How can I serve you?"

"Bored," En yawned. "Wanted to see what the real people are doing. How are things down here, Rosie?"

As Rosie chatted to En, Atsushi suppressed a sigh. He couldn't see where En's plan was leading. At present his cousin was wandering back and forth after the maid as she went about her work, occasionally mumbling a response to her words. It seemed more like a social call than anything else.
Beside him, Kinshirou cast a glance around the room. It was the store room for bed linens, with shelves of carefully-folded sheets (as Kinshirou watched, En helped the maid fold a particularly large one from a wheeled crate) and wooden trunks at the side. One of the trunks was open, revealing a pile of blankets inside. Kinshirou looked at it thoughtfully, then his attention was caught by the squeaky wheels of the crate.

Rosie was pushing it through an archway into the next room. Following her, En gave Kinshirou a casual yet pointed glance, and fixed his gaze upon the crate.

"He must be joking..." Kinshirou muttered.

"Do we follow?" Atsushi whispered back.

In reply, Kinshirou took his hand and tugged him through the arch.

If the next room hadn't been familiar at first glance, the soft 'whump!' of a bundle of laundry falling out of the chute and into the crate was. As they stood there, another bundle fell out of a chute across the room and flopped into the crate that stood beneath.

"These must be heavy when they're full," En was saying. "Must be hard work, pushing them all the way to the laundrette." He gave a flirtatious smile. "I bet you're really strong..."

"There's a knack to it," Rosie said. "I'm surely not as strong as you, your grace." En grinned at that, and took a step closer. "You know what would be fun?"

"What's that, your grace?" She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a shy smile on her lips.

Leaning against the nearest crate, En gave it a pat. "Racing these."

She shot a nervous glance at Atsushi and Kinshirou. "U-um, I-I don't think--"

Kinshirou crossed his arms. "Please, entertain him for a while, Miss Rosie. His boredom is making him a nuisance."

"It's fine if you want to," Atsushi nodded, tension filling his body as he realised what was going to happen. "En and I used to race little carts at Yufuin House, when we were kids."

"What do you say, first to the laundrette door wins?" En signalled to the nearly-full carts beneath the chutes. "If you check the way is clear, I'll switch over these carts. You won't get in trouble if we take the full ones."

Rosie's uncertainty melted in the wake of a smile. "I'll be right back," she promised.

The moment she stepped through the door at the side, En jerked the cart from its place and pulled out a pile of the laundry. "Hurry up and get in," he said, moving along to another and doing the same. "One each. Get out when I give the word."

Kinshirou pulled a face at the state of the laundry, but nonetheless clambered into the cart. He allowed himself a shudder of disgust when En dropped the rest of the laundry back in to hide him from view. This laundry absolutely reeked of unwashed bodies. Whoever it came from, Kinshirou certainly hoped they would hurry up and take a bath.

"Atchan, come on!" En dragged his cousin across to the other cart. "Get in and hide!"

Atsushi had one leg in the cart when he heard the door open in the next room, and a man's voice
called out to the maid.

"Rosie, her majesty wishes--Rosie? Ugh, where is that lazy girl?!"

Footsteps clumped across the floor, towards the room. En and Atsushi shared a startled glance, then Atsushi found himself unceremoniously pushed into the cart, a pile of sheets dumped on top of him a moment later.

Laying there, heart pounding loud enough he was sure he'd be discovered, Atsushi listened to what was going on in the room.

"Your grace! I did not expect to find you here!"

"Was bored..." En's voice was sleepy, disinterested. "Thought this looked like a good place to nap."

"Surely your bed is a better place, your grace."

"Hm, but it doesn't have Rosie..."

"Oh, your grace!" The newcomer, whose voice Atsushi now recognised as that of his mother's aide, sounded a mixture of amused and horrified. "I understand her charms, but this is her place of work."

En let out an audible yawn. "Hm? I just mean she's good to talk to, puts me right to sleep. What did you think I meant, Mister Trivett?" There was a smirk in En's tone now, and Atsushi fought back laughter at the aide's stuttering reply.

"I-I thought... Nothing at all, y-your grace," said the aide. "I-I simply meant that I... I hope you don't delay Rosie in her work, whilst you're...talking."

"She works and talks at the same time. Wears me out," En yawned again. "Dunno where she went. Said something about her majesty."

In the other cart, Kinshirou was trying to hold his breath. The stench of the laundry made him want to retch, and something about it was tickling his nose. He mentally willed En to hurry up and get rid of Mister Trivett, so they could get on with their escape. This was a ridiculous scenario! He was Crown Prince of Aurum, Husband of the Crown Prince of Epinard! He should be able to leave the palace at will, yet here he was, hiding in a crate of stinking laundry like some kind of thief!

"Well then," Trivett was saying. "Perhaps she already heard of her majesty's orders. Pardon the intrusion, your grace."

"Not a problem," En said.

Kinshirou sighed quietly. Finally, the man was leaving! He listened intently, lips pursed, nose still tickling with the stench of the sheets.

Then he sneezed.

"What was that?" Trivett's voice was demanding, suspicious.

Kinshirou froze, pulse racing as he listened to Trivett's footsteps coming closer.

Then he heard the sound of a nose being blown, loud and obnoxious.

"Must be some dust here," En's voice droned boredly. "All this dirty laundry."
"At least you're in the right place to dispose of that handkerchief," remarked Trivett. "You haven't had any strange dreams lately, have you, your grace?"

En snorted. "Only if a dream of bedding beautiful maidens is strange."

"O-of course not, your grace. Well, I'll be on my way. Her majesty has important errands for me to attend to!"

Trivett's footsteps faded, and a door opened and closed. En let out a sigh of relief, but had scarce done so when the other door opened and Rosie returned.

"You saved my skin, your grace," the maid said appreciatively.

"Listening at the door, were you?" En grinned. "Is the way clear?"

"Everybody is distracted, so yes."

"Great, let's get these carts into the corridor."

Atsushi wasn't prepared for the journey by cart. As it bumped and clattered rapidly over the flagstones of the corridor, he clenched his teeth and tried to brace himself between the sides to minimise how much he was being thrown around. Closing his eyes, he tried to imagine he was back on his ship at sea, curled up in bed on a stormy night. It was better than the reality of being in a cart full of dirty laundry.

He heard a triumphant shout ahead, and an exaggerated groan from closer by: Rosie had won the race.

"You're fast as well as strong," En said, as the cart Atsushi was travelling in rolled to a stop. "I'm impressed."

"Thank you, your grace. Though I must say, the carts are much heavier than usual today."

"Perhaps their majesties have been storing up their dirty laundry," En joked.

Rosie laughed. "You're naughty, your grace."

"Come on now, you can call me En," En's voice was flirtatious again. "You beat me fair and square."

"Somebody might overhear!"

"There's nobody around, is there? --Is that room empty? We could go inside...I'll give you something good..." There was a suggestive tone to En's voice, and Atsushi heard the maid's breath hitch in response.

"B-but we should put these in the laundrette first..."

"They can wait." A door creaked open, En's voice becoming more distant. "It isn't as though the laundry will jump out and run away."

Rosie's laugh was muffled by the closing of the door, and a moment later Kinshirou sat up in the crate, pushing the laundry off of himself and taking a deep lungful of clean air as Atsushi scrambled out from his hiding place.
Voices came from the laundrette - the washerwomen chatting about family - and from the room opposite. Atsushi listened intently, fairly certain he could hear En saying something about manjuu, and wondering exactly what his cousin was doing in there.

But then Kinshirou grabbed his hand, and signalled to the end of the corridor. The door there stood open and beyond was the goods yard of the palace.

A merchant's cart was just about to leave.

Together, they hurried after it and leapt into the back, ducking from view behind some empty containers.

Then they were on their way into the town: to freedom. To truth.

The mountains were looming tantalisingly closer. Thanks to the number of stops they'd made since setting off, it would still be time for lunch before they reached them, but they would definitely be there long before nightfall.

Ibushi rubbed a hand over his face, tired. He'd slept poorly last night, waking often from nightmares about being trapped in the mirror again, of following paths through the silver forest to reach the mountains, only to find the mirror glass stood between him and his target. No amount of reasoning with himself could quite calm his thoughts, and he slept only to have more nightmares.

Today, he had other concerns. Agneya had needed to stop more frequently than yesterday, and there was an element of desperation in the way she foraged through the undergrowth each time. He'd tried asking her what was wrong, but the dragon had ignored him and carried on nosing through the undergrowth. When Ibushi realised she wasn't even eating, he began to get irate and all but ordered her back into the sky.

Agneya had begrudgingly obeyed, but hadn't listened to any of his commands since.

"Are you sure she isn't sick?" Akoya asked quietly. He was tired from their early start, but not so tired he hadn't noticed the change in Agneya's behaviour—or how tense Ibushi was. He looked over his shoulder, seeing his pursed lips and clenched jaw and narrowed eyes. "She'll be alright, won't she?"

"I don't know," Ibushi admitted, tearing his gaze from the distant mountains in order to look at him. "She won't tell me what's wrong. She is behaving like an elderly dragon, but is far from it."

"Do you know any healing magic?"

"Not really. It's only useful if you know what you're dealing with."

"Oh..." Facing the front again, Akoya leaned back against him. "I hope she'll be alright," he said quietly.

Ibushi closed his eyes, head bowed. "I hope so too."

A distressed whimper came from Agneya, and Ibushi opened his eyes again. Then he gave a shout of alarm as she went into a nosedive.

"Hold on!" he called out, grabbing hold of Akoya with one arm and letting go of the reins in favour
of grasping the saddle.

Akoya let out a shriek, gripping on tightly, eyes wide as he tried to utter a spell. But the words got jumbled up in his fear, and Agneya continued to hurtle towards the earth, with no sign of stopping.

The dragon smashed through trees, her claws cutting great gouges in the earth as she skidded, dislodging her riders.

Tumbling from the saddle, the princes threw out shields to protect themselves, bouncing and rolling together in a tangle of limbs.

Then they bumped to a stop against a mossy tree trunk, and everything was quiet and still.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

In search of the truth behind the Dove Sickness (and plenty more besides), Kinshirou and Atsushi go out to the asylums, and later face a challenge far more cunning than the matter of learning how the plague began.

Meanwhile after their fall from the sky, Ibushi and Akoya follow the trail of destruction left in Agneya's wake. When they find her, they realise their journey is about to get a lot harder.

Chapter Notes

I know I only posted a chapter a few days ago, but now this fic is finished I'm impatient to post it all!
I still might write a brief epilogue, but I'm not sure.

The woman was pale and thin, dressed in the grey uniform of the asylum's inmates. There was a number rather than a family crest embroidered on her blouse, and when they entered the room she was already on her feet, as if she'd been expecting them.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of your highnesses visit?" she asked, curtseying.

Atsushi glanced at Kinshirou. This woman was said to be a lunatic, and after spending over twenty years in the asylum, was thought to be the first here to have come down with the plague now known as the Dove Sickness.

Yet aside from her uniform, there was nothing to suggest she was mad. Her gaze was intelligent, and might have been much more alert if not for the calming elixir all inmates were forced to drink.

"We're carrying out a top-secret survey," Kinshirou said, his words slightly muffled by the mask provided by the asylum. "We are to visit the asylums, and pay heed to those inflicted with the Dove Sickness, in hope that their stories will indicate the means of a cure."

This was the cover story that had gained them entrance to the asylum, and money had ensured the staff would say nothing of it. Yet the story only made the inmate laugh.

"A survey, in hope of finding a cure?" she beheld them, her green eyes flashing with merriment. "I'd say I was the queen of Argent, but then you'd think me mad rather than sarcastic."

Atsushi glanced towards the door to check the warden had gone, then pulled his mask from his face.

"Forgive me madam, but you're too young to be the queen of Argent."

Laughing again, the woman sat down on her bed and signalled to the chairs the warden had brought in upon their arrival. "I'm surely the right age, if you deduct the hundred years or so she has been a-
Atsushi sat down abruptly, taken aback by her words. "What do you know?" he asked, voice hushed.

Kinshirou, however, managed to retain more composure. "Perhaps we ought to start by asking your name," he said. "Your real name. And why you came to live here."

"My name is Lisbet Carmine, and I'm here because I'm mad, obviously."

Atsushi sat forward. "We aren't here to test you," he said gently. "We just want to know the truth."

"The truth?" Lisbet held his gaze with such an intensity that Atsushi felt as though she might be reading his mind. Then she smiled and looked at Kinshirou. "Are you going to sit down, your highness, or do you prefer to stand?"

Arching a brow, Kinshirou sat down. "Are you going to answer the questions properly?" he shot back.

"Of course." Lisbet crossed her ankles, folding her hands in her lap with an air of tranquillity. She fixed the Atsushi with a knowing gaze. "I'm here because I'm a witch, and modern society doesn't believe in witches."

Atsushi stared back, caught in her gaze. "Tell us what you know about Argent. Did you dream of a dove before you came to know of it?"

Lisbet snorted. "Dreams of doves? No, that was for the ignorant. I've always known about Argent."

Her words came as a surprise, and she grinned at the way they gawped at her.

"When you say you've always known..." Kinshirou frowned. "How long have you known for?"

"Ever since I was old enough to remember stories," she shrugged. "My mother told it to me, as her mother told it to her. Argent was a kingdom rich in silver, the home of all dragons, far more advanced in its magic than any of the surrounding kingdoms. People travelled from all over the world in order to study there."

"And what happened to Argent?" Kinshirou asked. "Washed away by a flood, perhaps? Swallowed by an earthquake? Razed by fire?"

Lisbet scrutinised him with the same knowing, intense gaze she had used upon Atsushi. "Do not ask questions you already know the answer to," she uttered.

Kinshirou was undisturbed by her gaze, at least outwardly. "Please humour us," he said.

"Then I'll tell you, Argent was struck by a curse formed by a demon and a witch. Together, they created the most powerful curse known to man, which caused Argent to sleep, its borders to close, and all record of it to fade from history."

"Yet you remember, and--" Atsushi looked away, having nearly let Ibushi's existence slip. He couldn't make remarks like that in an asylum if he wanted to get out again.

"Yes," agreed Lisbet. "Though I only remember the story. My great-grandmother remembered Argent itself, and divined what had happened, and along with others kept the story going."

"But how is it that they remembered, when everybody else forgot?"
"They were all strong magic users, and the perpetrators of the curse were not as powerful or as clever as they thought themselves to be. There were flaws. This, I divined for myself."

"And what flaws were those?" Kinshirou asked.

"They wanted a trophy, but foolishly lost it. They bragged of their triumph in stories, leaving a breadcrumb trail of evidence against themselves. They played with time, and those who interrupt its natural passing will always find it works against them. The root of their curse is powerful, but there are purer, greater powers in existence, against which that curse is no stronger than a leaf blown by the wind."

"I didn't understand most of that," Atsushi prompted, pushing his spectacles further up his nose.

Lisbet smiled patiently. "A mirror. A book of spells disguised as fairytales. A dragon, and a magic stronger than all else..." She counted each point on her fingers as she spoke, and shot a crafty glance at their matching wedding bands. "Heart," she finished.

Uncomfortable, Atsushi folded his hands, covering his wedding band as if to protect it.

"But dragons and magic don't exist," Kinshirou said.

"Ah," replied Lisbet. "Now you really are testing me, your highness. It is unhealthy to deny what you have seen with your own two eyes."

Alarmed, Kinshirou sat back in the chair. "I--You mustn't joke about such things!" he exclaimed, causing her to laugh.

"Forgive me, your highness, but it was too easy." Lisbet grinned, gaze carrying an alertness it had lacked when they first sat down. She looked sharply towards the door, then back at them. "The warden will come to fetch you soon, so why don't you tell me the real reason you're here, and if there's time, I'll tell you how to sneak back into your palace without being noticed."

Atsushi's eyes grew huge. "...You really are a witch..." he said breathlessly.

"Just like your former betrothed, I suspect," Lisbet waved a dismissive hand and smiled encouragingly. "Now hurry. You haven't long."

Atsushi glanced at Kinshirou, who was still staring at her. Then he took a deep breath, and began to explain.

"We're aware of Argent, and have witnessed magic and dragons. We're here because we're searching for evidence of those things to present to his majesty, so we can disprove the existence of the Dove Sickness. But we need help if we're to know where to find that evidence..."

Deep in the forest, with broken trees towering above, Ibushi groaned, his shield disappearing as he rubbed his head. Apparently magical shields weren't enough protection against rocks and tree roots when you were rolling over them.

"Are you hurt?" Akoya trembled as he clung to him, startled by the fall and the subsequent bruises. His shield shimmered around them, attuned to his trembling.

"Just some bruises," Ibushi hugged him gingerly. "Are you?"
"About the same. I thought our shields would protect us," Akoya's expression filled with distress. "I tried levitation, but I couldn't get the words out. Then we fell and ended up like this, ugh! I'm sorry, Ibushi."

"It wasn't your fault. We both did what we could."

"But it wasn't enough. You could have been badly hurt."

"But I wasn't. Our shields were enough to cushion our fall, even though they couldn't stop it..." Ibushi looked up at the shimmering shield around them, and managed a small smile. "This is like being inside a pearl."

Akoya smiled back, pleased. "That's what I imagined when I learnt to create it. You said to think of something powerful and strong. Jewels are always powerful and strong, because people always desire them."

"Like you, hm?" Ibushi cupped his cheek.

"I'm not--" Akoya broke off when a loud, animalistic keening echoed through the trees. Ibushi's heart clenched in fear. "That was Agneya!"

Akoya's shield disappeared as they scrambled to their feet, and in an instant they were racing through the forest, following the path of devastation left by Agneya's crash landing. The claw-gouges in the earth ended, but the smashed trees continued, and they sprinted onward, panting as they reached a rocky incline. The trees were sparser here, and it was harder to see where Agneya might have gone. But her keening continued, like a beacon for them to follow.

Then, as abruptly as it started, it stopped.

Ibushi and Akoya looked at each other in fear.

"Is she..?" Akoya gulped.

Ibushi shook his head, refusing to believe it. "Can't be. Agneya!" he called out. "Agneya!"

Somewhere nearby, a tired rumbling came in reply.

Ibushi ran off towards the sound without another word, scrambling up a pile of rocks and disappearing beyond.

Akoya clambered after him, too worried to think of spells to help him move faster. Reaching the top, he saw Ibushi standing before a cave in the side of the hill, his hands pressed to his mouth.

"Oh, Agneya..." Ibushi murmured, behind his fingers. "You... If I'd known..."

Akoya approached cautiously, uncertain of what he might find. "Ibushi?" he whispered.

A quiet grumble came from inside the cave, and Ibushi smiled widely. "Look," he said, motioning into the cave. "I didn't think it was possible. I thought she was sick, but she's... She's incredible."

Curious, Akoya peered into the cave, and his heart leapt for what he saw there.

Agneya was curled nose to tail, one wing arched protectively over a pale green egg.

"Is that hers?"
"Yes!" Ibushi grinned, eyes sparkling with excitement. "She must have been impregnated before falling to the curse. So the egg slept too, until it was time to be laid. This will be the first dragon born this century..." He blinked in realisation, excitement fading. "And it won't be born in Argent..."

Akoya hugged his arm. "Won't there be dragon eggs in Argent, too?"

"Yes, but we need to get into the kingdom and awaken it first."

"Which we're going to do."

"How?" Ibushi motioned to Agneya, colour draining from his face. "Our only hope of breaking the curse on its borders is Agneya. She won't leave her egg."

Akoya studied Agneya, who looked back at him tiredly. If Ibushi said she wouldn't leave the egg, he'd take his word for it. Ibushi knew far more about dragons than he did.

Which meant they had to find another way of breaking the curse. Surely there was something in one of the books he'd brought along. He really hoped so, because failure was out of the question, and he didn't want to wait until the egg had hatched before they continued. They were so close to the mountains...

"There has to be another way," he said, not quite as confidently as he'd have liked.

"Agneya was the only way. Gora said so. The scroll said so."

"We might be missing something..."

"Hmph, like when we argued over this in the first place?" Ibushi's tone was despondent, his head bowed. "You wanted to take her heart."

"Exactly like that," Akoya sighed in frustration. "Gosh, I never thought I'd wish that En was around to point out the obvious."

"It's just us, Akoya."

"I know. And with Agneya nursing her egg, it's absolutely just us."

Ibushi lifted his head. "What are you saying?"

"We have to press on."

"We can't. We've lost the key to getting into the kingdom."

"Well I'm not going back home to tell everyone we've failed. I can't, Ibushi. They'll laugh at me. At us. We have to keep trying."

"How?!"

"I don't know!" Akoya pulled back, staring at him. "You always encouraged me to keep trying, when I was looking for a way out of my engagement to Atsushi. So you've got to keep trying too, or it's not fair!"

"It's not fair..." Ibushi looked at Agneya, who rumbled at him in a soothing manner. "Alright," he said, heaving a sigh. "We'll keep going alone. We'll work something out. But the journey is going to be a lot harder on foot."
Akoya enfolded Ibushi's hand in his own. "That doesn't bother me," he said, privately dreading the thought of all the walking ahead of them.

"It does," Ibushi said. He gazed at him, tenderness shining out amidst the turmoil in his eyes. "It bothers me, too. It will take us longer-- But what's a few more days, when Argent has slept so long?"

"You're right." Akoya kissed his cheek. "And you're so much braver than I would be, if it were my kingdom."

Ibushi shook his head. "I'm not brave. I wouldn't be able to continue if not for you."

Akoya arched a brow. "If not for you I couldn't have even started."

The words warmed Ibushi's heart, even if they couldn't ease his troubles. He smiled gently and leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to his lips.

"In that case we're lucky to have each other," he murmured.

"Very lucky," Akoya agreed, combing his fingers through Ibushi's hair.

Ibushi kissed him again, arms encircling his waist to hold him close. "Let's say our goodbyes to Agneya. I hope we cross paths with her again."

"I hope so too..." Akoya looked towards the mountains, so close that they were visible beyond the forest.

Their quest wasn't over yet, but it had just become a hundred times harder.

The sky was darkening when Kinshirou and Atsushi snuck back into the palace. After a day of visiting the patients of the asylum, hospital, and homes for the elderly, they were mentally and physically drained.

Yet Atsushi's thoughts wouldn't stop racing. Having met these people first-hand, he now understood why there was such hysteria about the Dove Sickness. He and Kinshirou had sat down to speak with nearly sixty people today, and they had all told them the same thing.

A dream of a dove, flying over the mountains. *Once upon a time, there was a kingdom named Argent, which was locked away by a curse. Magic would break it. And heart. A heart of that which was there born.*

Atsushi shuddered. To have heard so many voices recite the same words had been unnerving. Very few of those they'd spoken to knew each other. There was no scientific explanation for how so many people, who had never met, could tell the same story, word for word.

"There's no unifying factor," Kinshirou said quietly, as they crept up the stairs to their apartment. "Even if an old-fashioned storyteller had come to town, it's highly unlikely that so many people would pay attention to their tale, let alone retell it so perfectly."

Atsushi waited until they were inside their apartment before he replied.

"That still wouldn't explain the dreams," he said.

"I know. That's why there's no other explanation but magic."
"Six months ago, I wouldn't have believed it possible."

"Me either," Kinshirou looked at him, fondness in his gaze. "A lot can happen in six months."

"A lot really has happened," Atsushi let out a sigh and flopped down into the chair to exchange his boots for his indoor shoes. "That thing they all said, about hearts and being born..."

"A heart of that which was there born," Kinshirou supplied. "That line was in the scroll Akoya showed us."

"I thought it was familiar. It means Agneya, right?"

"That's what he seemed to think. Ibushi, too."

Atsushi smiled wistfully. "Enchan said they had a fight about it on our wedding night. So much happened elsewhere when we were dancing in the grand hall."

Kinshirou tilted his head. "Do you mean you'd rather have been involved in it, than celebrating our marriage?"

"No, not at all!" Atsushi backtracked. "I'm happy things turned out as they did. I just would have liked to have met the Magician Gora. Yumoto said he was really nice."

"Yumoto thinks everyone is nice." Kinshirou hung up his coat, lips pursing as he thought over the situation. "Atchan, I have a theory about this Dove Sickness. I may have been wrong about a storyteller being an impossible explanation."

"How could you be wrong? It seems impossible!"

A buzz of excitement filled Kinshirou's chest as he turned the idea over in his mind.

"It's so obvious, I'll bet even Yumoto worked it out already."

"That's a little unkind, Kinchan."

"Yumoto sees everything in the simplest way. I wasn't being unkind." Frustration rose up alongside the excitement as Kinshirou realised how much he'd over-thought this. "Humanity has focused on science for far too long. We overlook the simplest, most obvious answers because we expect the truth to be complicated."

Atsushi was starting to feel impatient. It was all very well overlooking obvious answers, but Kinshirou still hadn't explained what was on his mind.

"What's your theory?" he pressed. "How is it so obvious?"

"We knew it from the start, but we didn't spend a moment thinking about it, because it was too obvious. Too convenient."

"What was too obvious, Kinchan?"

"The Dove Sickness was caused by the Magician Gora."

Atsushi looked dubious. "Well that would kind of make sense, since the sufferers have all dream of doves, and the Magician Gora turned into doves when he died."

"Ibushi said he ascended, Atchan." Kinshirou sat beside him, grasping his hands. "He turned into a
flock of spectral doves, which flew away. Imagine each dove as a part of his spirit. Imagine that spirit visited those with the most open minds, and told them the truth as they slept...

Atsushi's brows rose. "That means there was a storyteller."

"Yes," Kinshirou nodded, eyes wide. "And it was Gora."

Atsushi was silent for a moment, mulling over the theory. Well, it wasn't a theory. It couldn't be. It all rang so true, and was so obvious.

"We should ask Yumoto what he thinks of it all," he said. "If Yumoto has the same idea, I think it might be the truth."

"Yes, and it's worth consulting En on this, too."

Atsushi smiled. "I never thought I'd hear you wanting to speak with Enchan."

Kinshirou looked away, flushing slightly. "He may be lazy, but he has a unique way of thinking."

Wrapping his arms around him, Atsushi grinned. "I'm happy you like him, Kinchan."

"I didn't say that..." Kinshirou relaxed against him, half-closing his eyes. "However, he's proven his virtues recently. He's not nearly as useless as I once thought."

"You like him."

Kinshirou sighed in defeat. "Yes, I like him. A friend of yours is a friend of mine, Atchan."

Atsushi's heart swelled, joy bubbling up in his chest. "I'm happy," he said, and leaned in to claim a kiss.

But their lips hadn't scarcely met when there came a loud knock at the door.

They looked at each other in surprise.

"A visitor? At this hour?" Atsushi whispered.

From the other side of the door came a shout. "Open up in the name of the King!"

Atsushi's look of surprise became one of alarm. "What does my father want now...?"

He stood to answer the door, only for Kinshirou to grab hold of him.

"Your coat, Atchan!" he muttered, tugging it from his shoulders.

"And your boots," Atsushi replied, nodding to Kinshirou's feet. His boots were covered in dust from the town, and would give away the fact they'd been out of the palace.

Another shout came from outside. "Your highnesses!"

"Answer the door," Kinshirou said quickly. "I'll put these away."

As he disappeared into the bedroom, Atsushi brushed himself down, and went to answer the door.

A pair of guards stood the other side, their faces stern.

Atsushi drew himself up to full height, regarding them. "Yes?"
"The king requires the presence of their highnesses," said the guard on the left.

"Immediately," said the guard on the right.

Kinshirou chose that moment to emerge from the bedroom, effecting a yawn and doing his best to behave as though he'd just woken from a nap. "What is the meaning of all this noise?" he demanded.

"His majesty wishes to see us," Atsushi explained, eyes filling with worry as he looked back at him.

"Immediately," insisted the guard.

"Then we mustn't keep him waiting," Kinshirou said, resting a hand on Atsushi's arm. He beheld the guards with a firm gaze. "Please inform his majesty that we shall attend to him shortly, once we've made ourselves presentable."

The guard on the right shook his head. "His majesty said you must come immediately."

"We're to escort you," added the guard on the left.

Atsushi tensed beneath Kinshirou's hand, his stomach churning. "Has something happened?" he asked.

"All we know is that his majesty wishes to see you, your highness," said the left guard. "If you'd like to accompany us..."

Kinshirou squeezed Atsushi's arm. "By all means lead the way."

As they followed the guards down the corridor, they shared a worried glance. Had their escape and subsequent return been discovered? Had something terrible happened within the palace walls whilst they were gone?

Atsushi's hand found Kinshirou's, and held it tightly. He wasn't afraid of his father. The king was fair and honourable, and always allowed each party in a dispute to say his piece before he reached a decision.

But today, they'd broken one of the king's explicit rulings and left the palace. Atsushi didn't like to think of the consequences if they'd been somehow discovered. He'd seen the stress caused by house arrest in Perla, and didn't like the idea of guards and staff members watching his every move. He just wished his father would see sense, and accept that the Dove Sickness wasn't a sickness at all, but magic at work.

Then again, he'd have to make his father believe in magic at first, and unlike Akoya he had neither spells nor dragons as proof.

As they reached the doors of the king's audience chamber, Kinshirou let go of Atsushi's hand and took his arm instead, as was proper. Tension wound tightly through his body, and he fought to keep his expression passive, to hide his concern. No king summoned people like this needlessly. Whatever awaited them on the other side of the doors, it was not a casual audience.

Whatever it was, it was serious.

As the doors opened and an aide announced their presence, Kinshirou took a deep breath. Whatever was in store for them, he had to keep his mind sharp.

"Enter, my sons," called the king.
The stepped into the room and gave a customary bow to the king on his throne. As Kinshirou straightened up, he heard Atsushi gasp.

"Sister!"

Eyes darting around the room, Kinshirou spotted the woman standing at the edge of the room, her priest husband beside her.

Tall and proud in the robes of her religion, Princess Noriko stepped forward, her lips a cruel smile and her gaze icy. "Brother. And Prince Aurum. A pleasure as always."

She did not bow, merely folded her arms. The priest behind her did not even acknowledge them.

Kinshirou felt a prickle of irritation at her use of overly-formal terms. Her following lack of propriety indicated that her rudeness had been intentional. But he'd known this woman for years, and knew she behaved this way in order to goad them.

Beside him, he felt Atsushi tense, and knew her rudeness had bothered him. He tightened his grip on Atsushi's arm, and spoke up first.

"Princess Epinard," he greeted, considering that if she could be politely rude, so could he. "I see you have brought Bishop Limace with you. A pleasure to see you both. I hope you're both well?"

Kinshirou made a point of bowing as he greeted them, but neither the priest nor the princess deigned to acknowledge him.

Atsushi opened his mouth to admonish his sister for being so rude, but felt another tightening of Kinshirou's grasp, and looked to his father instead.

"Father, is everything alright? When the guards came, I was worried that something might be wrong..."

The king shook his head. "Nothing is wrong, as such. I called you two here in order to reach a conclusion."

"A conclusion, your majesty?" Kinshirou swallowed, fighting to keep his cool. The king's calmness felt dangerous, like that of a predator about to leap upon its prey.

With an exasperated growl, Princess Noriko threw up her hands. "He means the illegitimacy of your marriage!" she exclaimed.

Atsushi frowned. "Our marriage is not illegitimate!"

"Of course it is! You were packed off to marry that prissy Prince Gero, not this Prince Aurum!"

"A marriage is still a marriage, regardless of who is wed to who," Kinshirou pointed out, trying to sound calm and logical. He darted a glance at the king, who looked back coolly. He had to sound level-headed in this, else the king might decide his and Atsushi's marriage invalid--and that would put both them and Epinard in a difficult situation.

Bishop Limace stepped forward, a book of law under his arm. "It says within Epinard's own law books, that should a marriage come about through adultery, it is illegitimate."

"There was no adultery," Atsushi scowled.

"But you were betrothed to Prince Gero of Perla, were you not?"
"Yes."

Limace smirked. "Yet you married Prince Kusatsu of Aurum, and were therefore adulterous in your relationship with Prince Gero."

"There was no relationship!"

"Prince Akoya and Atsushi are just friends," Kinshirou said, brow twitching in irritation.

"That's all we ever were," Atsushi agreed.

Noriko snorted. "I have it on good authority, brother, that you entertained Prince Gero in his rooms on many an evening."

Kinshirou's eyes narrowed. "What good authority might that be, your highness?"

"Why, Duke Kurotori's newsletters of course!"

A noise came from the king that sounded suspiciously like a snort. He cleared his throat and looked at his daughter. "Do explain these newsletters, daughter."

"They contain all the gossip from the court at Perla," she boasted. "How many nights my brother went to Prince Gero! It's quite appalling, for two who were not yet wed!"

"If it contains all the gossip, then you'll know it was Akoya who called off the wedding," Kinshirou pointed out. "And if Duke Kurotori was partial to the truth rather than the rumours, he'd know that Atsushi and I have been in each other's hearts since long before that marriage was ever arranged."

He looked at the king. "Your majesty, I pray that you will forgive me for never stating my intentions towards your son."

The king waved a hand dismissively. "That goes without saying, my son. Noriko, do you have any real evidence that the marriage of these two is illegitimate?"

"Duke Kuro--"

"Gossip-filled newsletters are not evidence."

Bishop Limace rested a hand upon his book. "I believe it is still a case of adultery," he said.

"It would only have been adultery had Atsushi married Akoya," Kinshirou said, close to losing his temper. Atsushi's worries about his sister were more than justified, considering how desperately she and her husband were trying to cast doubt upon the marriage.

The priest frowned. "That isn't--"

"Atsushi," interrupted the king. "How long since you and Kinshirou have been lovers?"

Heat rushed into Atsushi's face, and his heart weighed heavy with dread. If he told the truth, he would be in a lot of trouble.

The king sighed at the sight of him. "Answer the question, my son. I won't be angry, I merely want to know the truth."

"I believe it is nearly two years, your majesty," Kinshirou spoke up, linking his fingers with Atsushi.

"That's right," Atsushi forced himself to meet his father's gaze. "Though I have loved Kinshirou for
"Yet you never thought to tell me, even in the face of your betrothal to Prince Akoya."

Atsushi gulped, watching his sister from the corner of his eye. Her face was red with fury, and he didn't dare meet her gaze.

"Epinard's future was more important, father," he said softly.

The king smiled. "You're a good boy, Atsushi. If I had known, I would have spoken of marriages with King Kusatsu, rather than King Gero. Had you gone through with my wishes and married Prince Akoya, your marriage truly would be illegitimate, and we would all be very sorry indeed."

"It still doesn't count!" Noriko stamped her foot. "I'll bet they didn't even have a proper ceremony! It's impossible to make arrangements for a wedding so fast! My own was on the first day of autumn, and Nikolas and I spent months planning it!"

A laugh escaped Atsushi's lips, his nerves in tatters. "Kinchan and I were wed on the last day of summer," he said.

Noriko crossed her arms. "And where is your proof of that, brother?"

"Hundreds of people attended the ceremony!" Atsushi exclaimed. "Kinshirou and I are wearing our wedding rings!"

"I asked for proof, not your say-so," she retorted.

"Proof is in the reports of the delegates sent to attend the wedding," said the king. "And it is here..." he picked up a letter from beside his chair. "A letter from King Gero, regarding the wedding he was proud to host. 'A triumphant way to see out the final day of summer,' he wrote. This is more than enough proof. Atsushi's marriage is legitimate, and in happening before yours puts him first in line for the throne."

"But that's just--"

"Noriko, the word of a king is as good as an oath from your own god."

The princess let out a growl of frustration and stomped towards the doors, the bishop hurrying out after her.

When they were gone, the king let out an irritated sigh. "I fear that won't be the last we hear from her," he said, rising. "You two are free to go about your evening as you wish. I won't keep you any longer."

Atsushi frowned slightly and took a step forward. "Father, why did you summon us here so urgently to prove our marriage, when you had the proof all along?"

The king gave a rueful smile. "I wanted you to realise what you may be up against. Noriko will not make your life easy. Your entitlement to the throne is indisputable, but she will never accept it."

"That's what I've been worried about," Atsushi adjusted his spectacles, frowning.

"Your majesty, Atsushi and I have talked about the matter at length, and shall be prepared for any move her highness might make against us."

The king smiled at Kinshirou's earnestness. "You two have always been a good influence on each
other... Except for that time you snuck out. Make sure you stay that way, won't you? And be mindful of your dreams."

"Yes, your majesty."

"Of course, father."

"Good. Off you go now."

As the couple left the room, Atsushi clutched Kinshirou's hand tightly. His father's parting statements gave him the impression that he knew they'd gone out of the palace today. Yet they hadn't been reprimanded, and that left him uncertain. They'd been forbidden from leaving, so his father should have been angry. Or was he just being paranoid? Perhaps nobody knew at all, except for En.

Atsushi frowned as they made their way back to their apartment. Considering the way Noriko had behaved, he and Kinshirou had much more to worry about than his father's anger.

Noriko had never given up easily on the things that she wanted--and what she wanted was the throne.
Awakening on the third day of their journey, Akoya grimaced to the sensation of damp seeping through the blanket, and pressed closer to Ibushi. Last night's fire had fizzled out hours ago, and a light drizzle was falling. The only warmth they had was each other.

"Good morning."

Ibushi's voice was quiet, and Akoya opened his eyes to find him looking pensively at their surroundings.

With magic lighting their way, they had set up camp in the forest when they became too tired to keep walking, and had chosen a tall evergreen tree to sleep beneath. Its boughs were covered in creepers and dense with foliage, which had seemed shelter enough for the night.

Sleeping out in the open had been thoroughly unpleasant, but it was even worse to wake up to find rain falling and a cold breeze blowing.

Akoya pouted, shivering a little in the cold. "Morning," he murmured. "Though I'm not sure if it's a good one."

"I have to agree with you on that," Ibushi kissed his forehead. "I'll try to get a fire going. We should eat breakfast and set off."

With some reluctance, Akoya freed him from his grasp and scooted further beneath the tree as he watched Ibushi gather firewood. He felt lazy for not helping, but he also felt tired. He had stayed awake long after Ibushi had fallen asleep last night, checking through his books for clues that might help them break the curse. But he'd found nothing, and the fire had burned low, and he'd ended up too cold and sleepy to keep reading by the light of his magic.

The coldness of last night lingered today, seeping through his clothes and setting a chill in his bones. Akoya shivered, inhaling deeply the scent of rain and cold and evergreen. There was something else lingering in the air this morning, something beyond the chill and damp. Something that set a tingling sensation across his skin, something that made him feel as though all the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up.

Something alive.

Something magic.
Akoya opened his mouth to remark upon it to Ibushi--and that was when the creepers attacked.

They whipped around his body, gagging his mouth as he was winched up into the branches above. He screamed as he struggled against his bonds, but the sound was muffled by foliage. The creepers held him tighter, knotting around his limbs, contracting around his head and chest, and biting into his skin.

Trembling with fear, Akoya looked around for means of escape. Every time he moved, the creepers tightened. He couldn't shout for Ibushi, nor could he utter a spell to defend himself.

He was trapped, and Ibushi was in danger of befalling the same fate.

When Ibushi returned, arms loaded with firewood, a look of puzzlement crossed his face when he found Akoya wasn't there.

From amongst the branches above, Akoya watched in horror, his heart pounding as every fibre of his being willed Ibushi to look up.

But he didn't, and Akoya was forced to look on in desperation as Ibushi rolled up their sleeping mat and put away their blankets. Then Ibushi built a fire, still oblivious to Akoya's predicament.

Akoya screamed against the creepers, the sound lost amidst the knotted foliage. His bonds were so tight that he was immobile, unable to move so much as his little finger. He was completely helpless!

Below, Ibushi finally got the fire going. He stood up and stretched, looking this way and that. "The fire is lit! Come and warm up," he called. Then, louder, as he approached the tree: "Akoya? Where are you?"

Creepers began to slink across the branches, and with shock Akoya realised the tree was preparing another attack, this time on Ibushi. He had to warn him! But how?! If only Ibushi would look up, he'd see what was coming for him! He had to find a way to warn him, to save him!

His eyes darted wildly, panic rising in his throat as he sought out some means of warning him. If only he could speak, he could utter a spell, and throw rocks or branches or--

His eyes came to rest on the fire, and he crinkled his brow in helplessness. Fire would warn Ibushi. But he couldn't reach it, nor could he call it to himself, not without uttering the spell.

Or could he?

He tried to steady his breathing as he watched the creepers crawl inexorably towards Ibushi. He couldn't panic. He had to stay calm and think clearly. That had been an important lesson in their training. Half the power of magic was in the intention, rather than the words of the user, right? When he believed he could do magic, he could. When he doubted, or panicked, he failed.

He couldn't fail now. Failure would mean death for them both.

Narrowing his eyes, Akoya set his intention on a stick protruding from the campfire, and mentally recited a spell.

A piece of wood collapsed within the flames, and his breath hitched in anticipation. But the stick remained. He glared at it, heart pounding, screaming the incantation over and over in his head.

With a loud crackle that made Ibushi jump, the stick wrenched itself from the fire. Ibushi turned,
reaching for his sword when he saw the flames floating towards him. He swiped at them in confusion, and ducked as the stick swooped toward him, only to rise at the last moment.

Ibushi looked up, and saw the creepers lurking above, poised like snakes ready to strike.

He dived aside just in time, a slash of his sword lopping off long tendrils that shrivelled when they hit the ground. The entire tree shuddered, and the creepers around Akoya drew so tight he couldn't breathe.

Struggling to inhale, Akoya found his vision starting to blur and fade. He closed his eyes, energy failing, and the stick fell, flames fizzing out with a hiss on the damp ground below.

"Akoya! Hold on!"

Ibushi's voice was muffled by the creepers that wound around Akoya's head. Opening his eyes, Akoya saw him, sword in one hand and a flaming log in the other, swiping left and right as the creepers attacked. Ibushi gritted his teeth, magical shield enveloping him as he fought. The creepers pounded angrily against it, more and more of them piling up to encircle the shield, trapping him.

Then Ibushi let the shield drop and thrust the torch forth into the midst of the creepers.

The tree let out an unearthly scream, snatching its creepers back from the ground as the flames took hold. Ibushi scrambled away before he could be dragged into the branches with them, and looked on as the fire spread across the boughs.

Akoya watched the flames in horror. He couldn't scream, couldn't breathe, and now he may well burn to death, too!

Suddenly the creepers around him loosened, and he plummeted towards the ground, scarce able to take a breath before he was caught by unseen forces and settled gently on the ground.

Ibushi dragged him away before he'd even had a chance to realise what was happening. They stopped by the campfire, breathing laboured, and eyed the tree warily in case of another attack.

But flames now reigned among the foliage, and sections of burning branches fell to the ground still glowing with fire, only to hiss into nothingness against the earth.

Ibushi grabbed Akoya's pack and handed it to him, along with his rapier. "Let's get away from these trees," he said, no longer having a taste for breakfast. It was dangerous to stay here, and this was a magic he didn't even think still existed.

"The sooner the better," Akoya agreed, voice trembling. He hefted his pack onto his shoulders and buckled on his rapier, eager to get away. His body hurt from how tightly he'd been ensnared, and his face stung from the rough fibres of the creepers. The tree had looked pleasant last night, but now it - and every tree around them - was a menacing and unfriendly.

Ibushi took another burning log from the fire and kicked earth over what remained to extinguish it, and they proceeded cautiously through the forest.

But if anything else waited to attack them, it held back from doing so, and their journey was silent but for the sound of their breath.

Only when the forest became sparser, and the evergreens gave way to golden sycamore, did their pace slow. There were no creepers to be seen, and the forest floor was carpeted in leaves the colour of autumn sunlight.
Akoya took a deep breath, ribs aching. The air smelled clean here, with none of the tingling sensation of magic that he'd felt at their camp. It was safe.

"You were definitely right about that curse," he said. With the attack, he'd come to realise they were facing a magic that was both strong and terrifying. "We're being held back from the mountains."

Ibushi frowned, unable to escape the memory of Akoya trapped amongst the burning branches. "We escaped," he said. As if to confirm they were both still alive, he caught hold of his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"You saved my life." Akoya spoke quietly, cheeks pale as he remembered the horror of being trapped.

Ibushi shook his head. "If you hadn't caught my attention with the fire, we would both be dead."

Holding his hand tighter, Akoya took a shaky breath. "If you hadn't known what to do, we'd both be dead," he corrected. "What was that thing? I didn't think anything magical existed, except for Agneya."

"Creeping Evergreen," Ibushi said grimly. "I didn't think they existed either. My father saw the burning of the last in Argent, and other kings and queens followed suit. That one must have been missed, somehow."

"Or protected for the purpose of evil."

"Perhaps, yes..." Ibushi frowned. "Though I don't know why it lay dormant so long, only to regain sentience on the very day we were beneath it."

"It has to be the curse," Akoya reasoned. "Something is trying to stop us from breaking it, even though we no longer have Agneya with us."

"That means we still have a chance," Ibushi said, pulse quickening. If it were impossible to break the curse, no magic would have bothered them. Therefore, it must be possible!

But one look at Akoya's pale, scratched face put paid to that little spark of hope.

"You haven't found anything yet, have you?" Ibushi asked softly.

Akoya bowed his head. "I'm sorry. There's nothing."

"It's...alright." Ibushi pulled him close. "Disappointing, but alright. We still have time."

"It's not alright. What if we can't do it?" Guilt gnawed at Akoya's heart as he met his tender gaze. "You've saved my life, you've helped me become a better person, you've been there for me when nobody else was, and yet I can't find a way to break a stupid curse!"

"You broke one already," Ibushi pointed out. "You freed me. If we can't break the curse on Argent..." He drew a breath, trying to put all the fears and uncertainties aside for a moment. "I'd be sad. But I don't...I don't need my kingdom in order to survive. And you don't need to break its curse in order for me to love you."

Sighing, Akoya let his head drop forward onto Ibushi's shoulder. "Loving you is precisely the reason I want to do this, Ibushi," he murmured. "You shouldn't have your kingdom kept from you. It isn't fair."
“There are many things in life that seem unfair, but it would be worse if I couldn’t be with you...” A shiver ran down Ibushi’s spine, visions of the blazing tree flashing through his mind. “I thought I would lose you today,” he admitted. "I was so scared, Akoya. If I’d lost you, any triumph over the curse would have been hollow.”

Akoya frowned against his shoulder and gripped onto him tightly. "We’re still alive," he said thinly. "We beat that magic. You saved me..." He lifted his head, remembering his fall from the burning branches. "You caught me, didn't you?"

"Yes. It was that levitation spell."

"I didn't know you could do that."

Ibushi’s expression turned grim. "Nor did I, but I knew I wouldn't reach you in time."

Silence fell between them as they looked at each other. Their brush with death this morning suddenly felt a lot more real.

At length, Ibushi lifted a hand, fingertips smoothing over the little scratches upon Akoya's face.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Akoya shrugged. "I will be. Are you alright?"

"I will be."

A tiny smile passed between them, and Ibushi tilted his head.

"Ready to continue?"

"Let's go."

Hand in hand, they walked through the of trees, leaves fluttering down around them and crunching beneath their boots. Gradually the golden canopy of leaves gave way to a blue sky, and they emerged from the edge of the forest and into pale autumn sunlight.

The mountains stood directly before them, grey and forbidding and impassable.

If there was one thing Atsushi had missed during his stay in Perla, it was the pleasure of being able to eat all his meals in his own private space, without being expected to join in some grand, pompous meal in an ostentatious hall. Not that he’d disliked his meals in Perla - the food had certainly been delicious - but it had been stressful to endure so much formality. The last thing Atsushi wanted to do over breakfast was sit up straight in his best clothes and make forced, formal conversation with a king, not to mention any number of nobles who would later gossip about anything he said.

It was far more pleasant to breakfast in the privacy of his own apartment, still in his pyjamas and dressing gown, with Kinshirou at his side. Breakfasts like these were casual and comfortable, and conversation flowed freely, uncensored unless they approached more sensitive, secretive subjects.

This morning’s breakfast was a little different to usual, for opposite sat Yumoto, full of energy (and filling himself with pastries) and En, who was dozing off over his plate. It was pleasant to eat together, though Atsushi had invited his cousins for a more serious matter than the mere eating of good food.
Once the staff had finished serving breakfast and left the apartment, En stretched and sat up straighter.

"What's this for, Atchan? Not that I'm complaining, but it is early..."

"We called you here to discuss the Dove Sickness," Kinshirou said, setting down his tea cup.

"Oh, that. It's a nuisance..." En sighed and popped a morsel of pastry in his mouth. "What about it?"

Atsushi leaned forward, lowering his voice. "We want to know what you think caused it."

En shrugged. "Dunno. Magic?"

"Obviously," Kinshirou crossed his arms, attention settling upon Yumoto. "We're looking for something more specific than that."

In the midst of licking jam from his fingers, Yumoto looked up. "Gora did it, didn't he?"


"Nuh-uh. He just turned into something else, 'cos he couldn't stay as a human anymore."

"Akoya said he turned into a flock of doves," Kinshirou nodded. "And Ibushi called it an ascension."

Yumoto tilted his head. "I don't know what that is, but Gora turned into doves and went to tell people about Argent when they were dreaming, because that curse made everyone forget."

"And now the whole kingdom thinks those people are mad." En chewed on a mouthful of food, a hard look in his eyes that suggested he was thinking. "Guess we should find old maps and stuff, that's how King Gero was convinced, right?"

Atsushi nodded. "That, and magic..."

"And the dragon," Kinshirou reminded him. "Mostly the dragon, I think. But we have none of those things here."

"We have some old maps in the vaults. I doubt we'll find a cache of magic scrolls, though..." Taking off his spectacles, Atsushi wiped them carefully with his handkerchief. Lisbet had told them they would find something in the palace vaults, though he doubted she realised how huge they were. "I wish we could have brought something magical back from Perla."

Yumoto sat up straighter, a smile on his face. "I can do magic!"

"You've never done magic, Yumoto," En said, ruffling his hair.

"No, but I bet I could if I had a spell book!"

"What makes you think that?" Kinshirou's gaze was cynical. The idea that anybody could do magic was utter nonsense. If everybody was capable of magic, it would never have been forgotten.

"Gora is my great-great-great-great..." Yumoto trailed off. "I don't know, but he's a Hakone of Scarlet, and I'm a Hakone of Scarlet, and he said we're family, so I can definitely do magic too."

"One of Akoya's ancestors was secretly a witch, or so Ibushi said," Atsushi mused. "It's possible."
"But we still don't have any writings on magic," Kinshirou reminded them.

En shrugged. "There has to be something somewhere."

Kinshirou and Atsushi exchanged glances. En and Yumoto had come to the same conclusions as they had.

Atsushi smiled. "We'll all be going into the vaults, then."

Yumoto cheered. "Great! Another adventure!"

Beside him, En slumped back in his chair. "This is going to be hard work, isn't it..."

"Of course it is," Kinshirou rolled his eyes. "But it will be easier with four of us, and your thoughts are appreciated, En."

The comment made Atsushi smile even more, especially when En sat up and nodded his consent. En and Kinshirou were getting along a lot better than they used to, and it made him hopeful that this new little adventure would draw his husband and his best friend even closer.

All was silent at the foot of the mountains, as if magic itself had stolen away every sound. No birds sang, no trees rustled in the breeze, and when Ibushi finally took a step forward, the soft thump of his boots upon the earth seemed ear-splitting, shattering the tranquil silence that had reigned before their arrival.

Ibushi faltered and stepped back, retreating to Akoya's side. His brow furrowed and he looked up the height of the mountains. He was sure he'd been here, long ago when he was still a child. Before the curse. There should have been a clear path into the mountains, a path that was safe and wide and led right into the heart of Argent.

Yet there was no path here. Of course there wasn't. The curse had closed that off. Instead the mountain was inaccessible, its base little more than a wall of rock-strewn, grassy earth, which gave way to a sheer, cliff-like rock face as the mountain disappeared into the clouds. Even if they could hew steps into the earth at the bottom, it would be impossible to climb the rocks beyond.

Ibushi knew there would be snow in the upper reaches of the mountain. Snow and ice, for which they were poorly prepared. Not for the first time, he wished Agneya was still with them.

A sigh disturbed Ibushi from his thoughts.

"Let's rest for a while..." Akoya slid off his pack and let it drop to the ground. He stretched and rolled his shoulders. It was a relief to put the heavy pack down, for his back ached from carrying it, and thanks to the Creeping Evergreen it still hurt to breathe too deeply.

Had there been a clear path into the mountains, Ibushi would have insisted they press on a little further before they stopped. But as things stood, they might be stuck here for some time. So he nodded, setting down his pack and reaching for his bow.

"I'll hunt down some lunch," he suggested. He didn't have an appetite after this morning, but he didn't want to sit still. Even though they couldn't get into the mountains, he needed to do something, anything if it would help steady his nerves.

Akoya pulled a face at the thought of being left behind. "We have enough supplies here," he said,
motioning to their packs. "You don't need to hunt."

"We'll need these for when we cross the mountains," Ibushi said.

"Then I'll come with you."

"You're tired, and you're hurt. You need to rest."

"I'm not hurt," Akoya huffed. "I'm fine. I just want to rest a little before I try to break this curse."

"Then rest." Ibushi touched his shoulder. "You need your strength for what lies ahead."

"I don't want to be left alone, Ibushi. I'd rather keep going and rest later, than be left alone..."

The way he glanced nervously back at the forest said more than his words could.

Ibushi sighed quietly and nodded. "I understand, and I'd rather stay by your side. But our supplies are running low, and we can't hunt together. Somebody needs to guard our packs."

Pouting, Akoya sat down on his pack. "I'll have to wait here, then. Don't take too long, Ibushi. I don't want a repeat of this morning."

"Nor do I." Ibushi shouldered his quiver. "Put up your shield whilst I'm gone, and be on your guard. I'll try not to be too long."

As he passed, Akoya caught his hand. "Stay safe," he said.

"You too..." Ibushi squeezed gently before he let go. Then he returned to the forest, light footsteps cushioned by fallen leaves.

Akoya watched him, marvelling at his stealth as he wove amongst the trees, an arrow notched into his bow and ready to strike at any moment. Every so often he lost sight of him, only to spot him a few seconds later, in a different part of the forest.

Then he disappeared completely.

Feeling vulnerable, Akoya put up his shield and huddled up on his pack.

He stared up at the mountain. He knew the path was hidden, kept out of reach by the curse. He knew there must be a way to break the curse, too. Even if they had to wait for Agneya to hatch her egg and rear her young, there was a way. Before that, he'd try every spell he had at his fingertips.

Akoya drew out one of his books and opened it at the last page he'd looked at. There were plenty of unlocking spells. He just had to find the right one.

Chest swelling with determination, he scowled at the foot of the mountain, at the curse that was invisible, but ever-present.

"I will break you," he promised under his breath. "I don't yet know how, but for Ibushi's sake, I will destroy you."

Unlike the cellars at Perla, the vaults of Epinard's palace were clean, spacious and well-lit, comprising of multiple levels, rooms and corridors, and organised by subject. Atsushi had been there plenty of times in order to study for his classes, and had once eagerly shown Kinshirou the room
dedicated to world cuisine, which boasted thousands of writings on food preparation and recipes. Kinshirou hadn't been as excited by the three century old secret family recipes as Atsushi had, but the historical section had been interesting.

This time, however, they were looking for other archived writings. They needed maps, and they needed magic.

"Cartography is that way," Atsushi motioned down a corridor. "Enchan, can you see to that one?"

En stretched, scooting around the group in the direction he pointed. "Any map over a hundred years old, right?"

"That's it," Kinshirou nodded. "Make sure it's a world map, or at least--"

"Continental, got it," En waved a hand in acknowledgement and wandered off.

Kinshirou shook his head and let out a sigh. "I'll check the historical records," he volunteered as they approached that section. "I'm familiar with these rooms. There's sure to be something amongst the trade logs if nothing else."

"Thank you, Kinchan," Atsushi took his hand and pressed a kiss to his cheek before he could disappear into any of the rooms. "If we find enough evidence, we can prove that the Dove Sickness isn't a sickness at all."

"Epinard needs to regain its peace of mind," Kinshirou kissed Atsushi's knuckles. "You can rely on us, Atchan. We'll find something."

Atsushi smiled, and kissed him on the lips before he finally let go. "I hope so," he said.

"We'll definitely find things," Yumoto said, as he and Atsushi continued along the corridor. Reaching the stairs, they headed down to the next level. "Maybe we won't find everything you'd like, but we'll find enough to prove that Argent really exists!"

"In Perla, there's no record of Argent," Atsushi admitted. "It's referenced, but not by name. It was only Ibushi's testimony that convinced King Gero."

Yumoto tilted his head. "But I really think we'll find something!" He grinned energetically. "Just wait! You'll read something, and the name of Argent will pop out of the page like magic!"

Atsushi smiled and patted his shoulder. Yumoto's optimism and spirit was enviable. He was always confident in the outcome he expected, and was somehow rarely disappointed. If optimism was a form of magic, then Yumoto had the power to change the tides.

"Would you look through the children's section, Yumoto?"

"I'd love to!" Yumoto smiled brightly. "I love fairy tales! What story do you want?"

Atsushi's brow wrinkled as he thought back to his time in Perla. "There was one called...what was it... A Kingdom of Dragons, I think. It was about Argent."

"Great! I'll definitely find it!"

Beaming, Yumoto bounded off down a corridor.

Atsushi sighed and called after him. "Yumoto!"
"Yes?"

Faced with his cousin's lively gaze, Atsushi chuckled. It was impossible not to feel upbeat with Yumoto around. He motioned to a corridor in the opposite direction. "The children's section is that way."

"Oh! Of course it is," Yumoto laughed. "I always get lost down here!"

Shaking his head in amusement, Atsushi left Yumoto to track down the fairy tales, and made his way to the last room in his mental list.

The religion section was another floor down, and the rooms had heavy wooden doors that bore shining brass plates, each one dedicated to a different branch of world religions. Atsushi had always found the section a little forbidding, but religion had always felt restrictive to him. He passed the rooms dedicated to modern religions and made his way to those relating to the old religions and cults. After a moment of staring at the two doors, he decided to try the writings on old religions first.

Cheered by Yumoto's optimism, he pushed down on the handle and stepped into the room, ready to get to work.

He noticed something wrong the moment he looked at the shelves.

Huge swathes of them were empty.

Atsushi knew the room wasn't meant to look like this. The shelves still bore the little brass labels, indicating that they'd once held a wealth of information about religions that even predated the written word. Yet the only books that remained were relating to belief systems said to be the roots of modern religions.

Confused, Atsushi tried the room on cults instead. It was the same, only worse: there were barely any books left.

Atsushi groaned. How could he prove the existence of magic if he couldn't find any?

He looked over the books that remained, and unfastened a couple of scrolls wedged between the shelves. They told him nothing useful: a cult of cat-worshippers that originated in Vesta, and a group of ancient nomads who had believed nature had healing properties, but ended up poisoning themselves through their practises. There was nothing about the use of magic.

There should have been something there. The room had a shelf for it, marked by its own slightly tarnished brass label: Magick & the Occult

Atsushi couldn't comprehend why the writings were gone—or where they had gone.

But he knew who would know

Leaving the room, he jogged back up to the first floor of the vaults.

He found Ms Ewer, the chief archivist, in the foyer, organising a number of tomes to be returned to their place. It wasn't uncommon for books and scrolls to be borrowed by the kingdom's scholars, though the huge number gone from the rooms downstairs didn't seem normal.

"Ms Ewer?" Atsushi approached her. "I was researching in religion, and--"

"Not thinking of converting, I hope." The archivist had known Atsushi since he was a boy, and had
never been adverse to telling him off when he'd used the vaults as a playground.

Atsushi shook his head. "Not that. I was looking for the old religions and cults, but--"

"It happened when you were away, your highness." Ms Ewer set the last book into place, regret in her gaze. "Her highness took an interest. Following the past few years, I welcomed it, thinking she'd come to her senses. Had I known her intention, I would never have let those writings leave the vaults."

Atsushi's blood turned cold, and when he spoke, his voice was barely a whisper. "What...what did she do...?"

Ms Ewer sighed. "She burned them, your highness. Piled them up in her courtyard and set them aflame, decrying them as heresy. All those old, irreplaceable books..."

"It's all gone..." Atsushi stared, colour draining from his face as his imagination summoned forth visions of a towering inferno of books.

"I'm sorry, your highness."

"It wasn't your fault. Thank you, Ms Ewer." Disappointed, he went to find the others, sorely hoping they were having more luck than him.

By the time Ibushi returned with game and foraged fruits for their lunch, Akoya had managed to build a small campfire. The flames that danced within the circle of stones were certainly induced by magic, but provided as much heat as a natural fire.

Surrounded by his shield, Akoya crouched beside it, warming himself. There was a stack of books beside his pack, various pages marked with yellow leaves. Ibushi raised a brow at them, but didn't comment on it. Hunting hadn't given him the release from his thoughts that he'd wished for, and his mind was heavy with worry. He could guess why the books were there, but didn't want to think about the curse, let alone discuss it.

Akoya lifted his gaze from the flames as Ibushi approached, expression flooding with relief. "You're back," he said, gratefully dropping his shield.

Ibushi nodded. "Hungry?"

"A little."

"I'll prepare lunch, then."

Silence fell between them as Ibushi worked on their lunch, a tiny frown on his face. Even this wasn't enough to stop him thinking about Argent. It seemed impossible to take his mind off it, when the mountains were right there in front of them.

Akoya didn't like Ibushi's silence. It was unnatural for him to be so quiet, and he'd learnt that silence like this meant Ibushi was upset.

"Was hunting difficult?" He spoke quietly, with a sense that talking any louder would have sounded harsh.

"Not really," Ibushi shook his head. "It just took time."
"Well, it was worth it," Akoya did his best to smile. "This smells nice."

"It's only a simple meal. My friends and I used to cook things like this all the time, when we went out with our dragons..." Ibushi's voice grew quieter as he spoke, and he eventually trailed off, his gaze flitting to the mountains.

Akoya reached for his hand, discomforted by the anguish in his expression. It made his heart ache to see Ibushi look so troubled.

"Tell me more about that?" he asked.

"I've told you the stories countless times."

"I like hearing them."

Ibushi looked at him, chest growing heavier when their eyes met. He tore his gaze away, staring into the flames instead. "Not now, Akoya."

"Oh..." Akoya pouted, but didn't draw his hand away. Instead he moved closer, letting his shoulder rest lightly against Ibushi's as the silence drew in once more. It didn't take a genius to guess what was on Ibushi's mind. It was on his mind, too.

Akoya glanced at his books, each one neatly marked at the appropriate pages. He felt tired, but didn't like to sit there uselessly whilst Ibushi did everything. Ibushi had done all of the work on their journey so far—all the foraging, cooking, camp-making and route-finding. Until now, he'd built all of the campfires too, lighting them in the traditional way. Akoya felt like a cheat for using magic, but he didn't know how to light a fire otherwise.

After a moment of deliberation, he let go of Ibushi's hand, picked up a book, and approached the mountain.

Ibushi watched him from the corner of his eye as he cooked their lunch. He saw Akoya flip through the pages of his book and hold up his hand, and heard the soft echo of an old incantation. Akoya's shoulders slumped when nothing happened, and he tried again, louder.

When nothing still happened, he turned to another page, a new spell issuing forth from his lips, with the same result as the last one.

Ibushi sighed inwardly and forced his attention back on their food. This was what he was afraid of: that nothing would work.

He didn't want to admit that he was scared, though he couldn't lie about it. But Akoya had made it clear that he needed him to stay strong, so Ibushi wanted to avoid the subject of his fear altogether. Right now, he was so afraid of failure that he couldn't bear to get any closer to the mountain.

Akoya was crouching now, both hands pressed against the ground, book rested between them as he yelled incantations at the soil. He let out a growl of frustration when the mountain remained the same as always, and at that point Ibushi decided to call him back.

"Lunch is ready," he called out.

Gathering up his book, Akoya returned to the campfire, his face grim with determination.

"I will break that curse," he uttered.
"Rest now," Ibushi handed him a bowl of food. "Eat this and warm up."

Getting the distinct impression that Ibushi didn't want to talk about it, Akoya accepted the food and started to eat. Irritation buzzed in his brain, and he shoved food into his mouth with none of his usual delicacy. All he wanted was to work out how to break the curse on Argent's border, which was the entire reason they were sitting here. Yet Ibushi didn't want to talk about it, and Akoya needed to talk about it, needed another mind to turn over the problem, to spot the things that he'd overlooked.

Determined not to give up so easily, he quickly finished eating and set down the bowl.

"I don't want to fail at this, Ibushi," he said.

Ibushi lowered his bowl, having barely touched his food. "What do you have in mind?" he asked. He was weary of thinking about the curse. Breaking it seemed such a straightforward task in theory, but now they were here - without the key to opening the border, at that - the reality of impending failure was all too great.

Akoya signalled to his books. "I'll try every unlocking and curse-breaking spell I have, until I find something that works. But I think I need to work them on the right part of the mountain."

"What would be the right part?"

"Wherever the original path was."

Ibushi sighed and got to his feet. Did Akoya not realise how huge these mountains were? It would take a lifetime to try out so many spells all across the foot of the mountain, in the mere hope that they would get the right spell in the right place!

"I don't think that will work," he said.

"We have to try."

Ibushi raked a hand through his hair. The resolve in Akoya's voice revealed that he had no intention of giving up, and it spurred him on to at least stop and consider the unfriendly landscape that stood before him.

"There used to be a path," he said quietly, scowling at the rocks. "It was near here, I'm sure. It should be nearby, because there's a clear path through the forest."

"And no path leads to a dead end," Akoya nodded, relieved that he was talking about it again. "Except in a maze. But I don't think this is a maze."

"No. There should be a path." Gulp ing, Ibushi finally walked closer to the mountain, eyes darting back and forth as he sought a place that might once have provided a route through the rocks. "Maybe here," he signalled towards some fallen rocks, then frowned and turned in the other direction. "Or here. Or here..."

He walked back and forth, hands tugging through his hair as he scoured the earth. It all looked impassable, all looked as if it had been that way forever. This was fruitless, there was no way over the mountains, no way into Argent--no way they were ever going to succeed! Breath hitching, Ibushi stopped in his tracks and covered his face with his hands.

"I don't know," he uttered brokenly. "I really don't know."

Abandoning his books beside the fire, Akoya went to him. "It's alright," he said, arms encircling
Ibushi's trembling shoulders. Ibushi leaned against him, and he held him tighter. "There has to be a way," he said. "We decided that, right?"

"Without Agneya here, I don't know how we can do it..." Ibushi mumbled the words into Akoya's hair, his arms sliding around him in defeat.

"But there has to be a way, else the curse wouldn't have tried to stop us."

"It could have been a coincidence. I awoke from my slumber in the mirror when you were present. Agneya awoke in your presence. The Creeping Evergreen awoke in your presence. What if we're wrong? You're full of magic, Akoya. What if that's all any of this has been from the start? Just you."

Akoya frowned. "My old self might have liked that idea, but I hate it," he said. "This is bigger than one person, Ibushi. I refuse to believe all this has happened just because of my heritage. Besides, the Magician Gora surely foresaw this."

"Gora wouldn't have sent us on a wasted journey..." Letting out a breath, Ibushi tightened his arms around him. "Yet he can't have foreseen what happened with Agneya."

Humming in agreement, Akoya closed his eyes and wished a solution would come to them. "Perhaps we have to wait until she's ready," he said, deflating a little.

"It seems that way."

"I don't want to go back to the palace. It would be too hard to admit I failed."

"You haven't failed..." Ibushi blinked. "We haven't failed," he realised, spirits lifting. "We're just early."

Akoya let out a soft sigh. "Then we need to find something to do until we're on time, because I'm not going home. It isn't home anymore. There is nothing for me there."

Ibushi pulled back then, a sense of peace rising in his heart when their eyes met. "You have me," he said. "No matter where we are, you have me. You have my every thought, and my heart, and--oh. No... No, that's too simple. Too stupid."

Akoya's eyes grew wide, his skin tingling with sudden magic. "We are completely stupid!" he gasped, catching on. "This wasn't about Agneya at all! You were born in Argent!"

"Except I'm not a magical being..." Ibushi looked dubiously towards the mountains. "But I'm here. With my heart. So if it's true, there should be a path." He scanned the mountainside, brows knitting when he saw nothing "But there isn't."

"The scroll never said anything about a magic being, just a heart," Akoya reasoned, confidence wavering. "Maybe... Maybe we just need to get closer."

Ibushi looked doubtful, but took a few steps closer to the mountains, Akoya at his side. For a moment he thought he could smell magic in the air. But there had always been magic in Akoya's scent, and Akoya was standing right there beside him, so he brushed the feeling off.

Akoya took a sharp breath as they got nearer, and winced at the way it hurt his ribs. Magic crackled across his skin.

"Do you feel that?" he asked quietly, grip tightening on Ibushi's hand.
"I thought it was my imagination."

Suddenly the mountain pulsed before them, and the ground began to Tremble violently. They clung to each other, stumbling backwards across the vibrating earth.

"Alright, this is definitely not my imagination!" Ibushi shouted, above the noise of the tremors.

Then the trembling stopped, as abruptly at it had started, and the crackling of magic began to fade.

Ibushi stared at the sight before them, and his heart soared.

Where once had been grass and rocks, there was now a path, well-worn and winding, which led far up into the mountainside and out of sight.

"Ibushi, you were right!" Akoya beamed. "There is a path here!"

"You were right," Ibushi insisted, a relieved smile on his face. "It really was as simple as getting close enough."

"Those fools who trapped you never imagined you'd ever come here. They thought they could shut Argent away forever with their curse, but they were wrong..." Akoya hugged Ibushi's arm. "Shall we get on our way?"

Leaning in, Ibushi pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "Let's."

Argent's fate suddenly looked a lot more hopeful.

Hours had passed, and Atsushi left the vaults alone. En had found the maps fairly quickly, and had already gone back to his apartments, promising to drop the maps off at Atsushi and Kinshirou's on the way. Yumoto was eagerly reading fairytales, and Kinshirou was still leafing through cumbersome old trade ledgers, so focused on his task that he'd barely acknowledged Atsushi's departure.

Atsushi had helped him search the historical records, but after several hours he'd started to get eye strain, and was more than a little disheartened by the lack of evidence.

Kinshirou, however, had been so certain they'd find something that his optimism almost rivalled Yumoto's.

But Atsushi had tired of the unrewarding search. His back and shoulders ached from hunching over the old books, and he was starting to feel angry about the whole thing. Aware that he needed a break, he'd told Kinshirou he was returning to the apartment to look at the maps, kissed the top of his head, and left the room.

Kinshirou's distracted response stung a little, but Atsushi tried to put it out of his mind. His husband was engrossed in study, and was doing this for Epinard's sake--for everyone's sake, really. Once they found evidence of Argent's existence, this whole Dove Sickness thing could be laid to rest.

Atsushi rubbed his neck as he reached the apartment, and decided to take a bath before Kinshirou returned. Some time spent relaxing in the warm, fragrant water would do him good.

Yet before he could ring for his staff, he spotted the little ribbon-tied box, sitting amongst the rolled-up maps on the table.
Curious, he tugged at the ribbon and lifted the lid to find two individual-sized cakes inside. Covered in icing and decorated with berries, they looked utterly delicious.

Atsushi looked for a note or a tag, but there was nothing to tell him who it was from. Gaze drifting to the maps beside the box, Atsushi smiled. Trust En to leave a sweet treat like this. He must have noticed his tiredness, back in the vaults. En always noticed things like that, and Atsushi was surprised he hadn't dragged him away when he left himself.

He'd have to thank En tomorrow. These cakes would be nice to eat with tea later on.

About to close the lid, Atsushi's stomach growled, reminding him that he'd skipped lunch. It was too late to reasonably ask the chef to make him something now, and far too early for dinner.

...The cakes looked mouth-wateringly tasty...

Reaching the decision that Kinshirou wouldn't mind if he ate his share now, he plucked one of the cakes from the box and bit into it.

The icing was deliciously sweet, a contrast to the sour juice of the fruits. Atsushi licked icing from his lips and chewed his mouthful, enjoying the sweet, the sour, and the strange bitterness of the filling.

He took another bite, and was in the middle of chewing when the world began to blur. Thinking he'd overdone the studying, he took a step toward a chair, his legs suddenly heavy and weak. Then his body began to tremble, and his vision started to turn black, and the last thing Atsushi thought before he collapsed was that he was going to drop the cake.

Only moments later, Kinshirou burst into the apartment, a ledger held open in his hands and his eyes wide with excitement. "Atchan, you won't believe what just hap--Atchan?!

The ledger was abruptly thrown aside, and Kinshirou dropped to his knees beside the convulsing body of his husband. "Atchan?--Help!" He yelled back towards the door, which he'd left open in his haste.

As footsteps sounded behind him, he shook Atsushi's shoulders, but he was unresponsive.

"Your highness? What--Oh no, his highness!" gasped a maid, first on the scene.

"Call a doctor!" Kinshirou barked, not looking up.

"What's happened?" asked another voice, as a pair of footsteps raced away.

"I..." Fear rose up in Kinshirou's heart as he absorbed the scene around him, taking note of the box, the cake crushed in Atsushi's hand, the icing smeared across his lips, and reaching a terrifying conclusion.

He swallowed hard, mouth dry as he addressed the staff that crowded around them.

"I think Atsushi has been poisoned."
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

As Atsushi's life is slowly stolen from him, Kinshirou does all he can think of to save it. Far away, Ibushi and Akoya are progressing through the mountains. It's hard-going and treacherous, even deadly--but fires burn even amongst the coldest of snow and ice.

It did not take the doctor long to confirm Kinshirou's suspicions: Atsushi was a victim of poisoning. And so Kinshirou's worst fears were realised.

There was no cure.

Atsushi was going to die.

Slowly, painfully, horribly.

Kinshirou refused to accept it, told the doctor to get out and called for another, and another, until every doctor in this town and the next had attended to Atsushi's bedside. Each one had examined him carefully, only to sit Kinshirou down and gently deliver their prognosis: *I'm sorry, your highness. There is nothing I can do. He may have a week at best.*

Kinshirou wanted to scream. He wanted to cry, and break things, and beat upon Atsushi's chest until he opened his eyes again. Yet he hadn't the energy to lift a finger, and when the constable came to investigate the poisoning, could barely find it within himself to answer the questions.

"I wasn't here," he told the man, guilt taking hold of his heart. "We'd been in the vaults, and Atsushi had tired and returned alone. I found him on the floor when I arrived."

"Has anyone been in the apartment, besides yourselves and your staff?"

"Atsushi's cousins, the dukes. They came for breakfast..." Kinshirou's eyes narrowed as he recalled an earlier exchange. It was En. En had come into their apartment--alone, at that. "The Duke of Cerulean. He delivered some maps, whilst Atsushi and I were still in the vaults."

"Can you think of any reason why his grace might wish to harm his highness?"

Kinshirou shook his head. "No. They're best friends. He...he wouldn't..."

The constable nodded. "Thank you for your time, your highness. I'll interview your staff now."

"Thank you..." Kinshirou drifted back to the bedside, numbness taking over as he took hold of Atsushi's clammy, lifeless hand.

From the next room, he heard the constable talking to their staff. None of them knew where the cake had come from, nor had they witnessed En within the apartment.

It seemed the constable had chosen the apartment as the base for his investigation, for others were summoned for questioning, among them the town bakers - all of whom denied any knowledge of the cakes - En, and Yumoto. The dukes had wanted to see Atsushi, but the constable demanded they sit
and state their alibis.

Wishing they would all go away, Kinshirou eavesdropped. He heard Yumoto explain that he'd been reading stories in the vaults all day, until he got hungry and ate some snacks with Ms Ewer. En's alibi was a little harder to prove: he'd dropped off the maps and gone home, where he'd fallen asleep. No, nobody had seen him. But the cake box had been there when he'd arrived.

Kinshirou wanted to believe him, but he needed someone to blame for Atsushi's condition. Atsushi had feared that someone would make an attempt on his life, and En knew that.

Except En loved Atsushi. Cousins though they were, their bond was that of brothers. En wouldn't have poisoned him. He couldn't have.

"Are you sure there is nobody who can confirm your whereabouts?" The constable's tone suggested he thought he'd found the perpetrator.

"If there is someone, I want their behaviour overlooked," En replied.

The constable clicked his tongue in irritation. "Very well, your grace. Who need I speak to?"

"Rosie the laundress."

Kinshirou grimaced at that, and held Atsushi's unresponsive hand a little tighter. If only Atsushi could hear this. He'd be appalled. His beautiful eyes would be wide and bright with surprise, and instead of this unhealthy pallor, his cheeks would be burning with embarrassment.

With a sigh, Kinshirou kissed Atsushi's knuckles, wishing there was something he could do. If he could take the poison into himself and save him, he'd do it in a flash. But the doctors had all been insistent: there was no way to remove the poison now it was in Atsushi's system. There was no way to nullify it. Modern medicine knew no means of treating a poisoning like this, only ways of making the victim's passing as comfortable as possible.

As he sat there, he distantly heard a new voice in the apartment: that of Rosie, the laundress who had unwittingly helped him and Atsushi escape the palace.

He listened half-heartedly as the constable ran through his usual questions, and finally got to the crux of the matter.

"What were you doing between this morning and late afternoon?"

"I was working, sir."

"Now then miss, I know you were with his grace."

"Uh..."

"It's alright," the constable spoke more gently this time. "You won't be in trouble if you tell the truth."

Rosie sighed. "It's true," she admitted. "En--His grace came to me in the store room and we..."

"What did you do, Rosie?"

"We...ate manjuu..."

"What on earth is a manjuu?"
"It's a snack from Perla," En supplied. "Very tasty."

"So allow me to confirm: His grace came to you in the store room, to eat this snack. And then...?"

"He... He fell asleep in the blanket box, sir. I'm sorry, your grace."

"Eh, it was a good nap."

As he overheard the exchange, Kinshirou looked at Atsushi for signs of life. Atsushi would be laughing at this. He always had such a wonderful laugh, so vibrant and hearty. His smile was wonderful, too, always so warm and welcoming, so kind and accepting. Kinshirou had loved to be on the receiving end of those smiles. They had always made him feel like the most important and cherished person in the world.

At length the constable finished his interviews and took his leave of the apartment, and Kinshirou thought himself alone until Atsushi's cousins joined him at the bedside.

"He'll be alright, Kinchan," Yumoto said, crouching at his side.

Kinshirou shook his head, unable to voice the truth.

En approached with soft footsteps, face pale and gaze haunted. "If only I'd known what was in that box," he said. He touched Kinshirou's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Kinshirou didn't want to be touched, least of all by En, but didn't have the energy to pull away. "The doctors said there is nothing they can do."

Yumoto rested his chin in his hands. "I'll bet magic can do something."

"There's no magic in the kingdom. Noriko destroyed anything that might have helped."

"But there's lots of magic somewhere!"

"Not here. Perla is the only--" Kinshirou jumped up. "You have to go to Perla."

En raised his brows. "But that would take days, and the doctors said--"

"I don't care!" Kinshirou snapped. "This is about Atchan's life!"

"I think you can find help here," Yumoto said. "There's magic people even if there aren't magic books."

Kinshirou rounded on him. "Shut up! You two need to go to Perla, and you need to go now. If there's any hope of saving Atchan, it's there, and two of you can work faster than one, so go. Don't let me down. Don't let him down."

Yumoto blinked at him. "I'll go, but you should try to help him too. There's definitely magic people who can help you."

Fury burned through Kinshirou's heart. Why did Yumoto insist on pressing this?

"You can help me!" he shouted. "For once stop being useless and childish, and go to Perla to find something that will save Atchan!"

"But if you asked--"
"Atsushi is dying!"

There. He said it.

All the anger fled from Kinshirou's heart and he slumped down in his chair, eyes prickling with tears.

"But Kinchan--"

"Come on, Yumoto," En sounded weary, in a way that revealed he was deeply troubled. "We've got to catch that boat to Perla." He squeezed Kinshirou's shoulder. "We'll do our best for him."

En led Yumoto from the apartment, and the door clicked softly shut behind them.

Closing his eyes, Kinshirou pressed his lips to Atsushi's fingers and prayed that he would live.

Though the newly-revealed mountain path was wide and clear, the scenery remained as forbidding as the mountains had been on first glance. Aside from the grass in the lower reaches, there was nothing alive here.

But the air wasn't quite as cold as expected, and the climb kept them warm anyway, and as the sun shone down on them, Akoya decided he was enjoying this.

"How long will it take to get over the mountains?" he asked, as they paced up a steep incline.

"I'm not sure," Ibushi paused to squint at the rocks that towered above them. "If we'd been with Agneya, just half a day. On foot it could be three or four."

Akoya followed his gaze to the snow-covered peaks. "I could try to summon the upper path to us," he said, thoughtful. "Like when we trained. It would take us to the path, instead of bringing the path to us."

"It's dangerous to use magic like that." Ibushi spoke as gently as he could. He didn't want to discourage him, but certainly didn't want to risk any more danger. "Remember what I said about the trees."

"You said I might have uprooted them, yes, but a mountain is more firmly attached to the ground than a tree."

"It could cause a landslide. We're safer if we keep walking."

"...Alright..." Disappointed, Akoya adjusted the pack on his shoulders. It felt heavier than before, and he wished he'd thought about its weight when he'd loaded it up with so much at home. Then again, he'd never planned to carry it, not when he had a dragon to carry it for him. "I wish Agneya was still with us," he said, as they continued up the path.

"Me too," Ibushi admitted. "This would be a lot faster."

"Gora can't have foreseen her pregnancy. He must have misunderstood his visions of the future."

Ibushi hummed. "Gora was rarely wrong. He said Agneya was a means to an end, and though we've parted ways with her, we're still in the place we ought to be." Now they'd broken through the border, his thoughts were much clearer. "Perhaps we were wrong."

"What do you mean?"
'We misunderstood him. His words, his scroll.'

"It wasn't her heart that opened the border, but yours," Akoya gazed thoughtfully out across the mountains. "If we misunderstood, then how is Agneya a 'means to an end' as he put it? We've yet to reach an end."

"She got us this far, I suppose... Her existence made your father believe in magic."

"And the rest of the palace."

"Perhaps the rest of the world, eventually." Ibushi looked back and held out a hand, a flicker of concern in his gaze.

It was easy to understand the words left unsaid: that if they couldn't awaken Argent, Agneya would remain the only living dragon in the world. The outcome was possible, but far from preferable, and the thought was outright heartbreaking.

Lacing their fingers, Akoya fell into step with him. "Whatever purpose Gora intended for her, she'll have plenty of dragons to work with, once we've defeated this curse."

"Then we'd better not let her down."

Ibushi gazed ahead as they continued to hike upward. The path was becoming steeper, crumbling here and there from lack of upkeep. They were the first people to tread this path for a hundred years, which might have been exciting if not for what awaited them at the end of it.

For no matter how much faith he had in Akoya's ability with magic, the closer he got to Argent, the more uncertain he became that the curse could ever be broken.

Afternoon had turned to night, and night turned to morning, candles burning low and flames guttering as the sun began to rise. The apartment was drenched in silence, pierced only by Atsushi's ragged breaths. Kinshirou continued his vigil at his bedside, refusing to leave him even long enough to have breakfast. At noon, a maid brought him a tray of cold food to eat at will, along with a summons from the king.

Kinshirou ignored the summons and picked at the food, keeping one eye on Atsushi at all times. He took no joy in eating and barely tasted the morsels and bread and cheese and cured meats that passed his lips. The only reason he ate was to keep up his strength, so he could continue to watch over his beloved. He couldn't leave Atsushi like this. He had to stay awake, by his side, in case Atsushi needed him.

"You should rest, my son."

The king's voice, heavy with tiredness, disturbed Kinshirou from his thoughts.

"Your majesty," he said, throat scratchy from hours of silence. "Please forgive me for not attending you."

"A king must be willing to attend his subjects in their time of need." Placing a chair beside Kinshirou's, the king sat down. "How is he?"

"He--" The words stuck in Kinshirou's throat, and he shook his head. "I'm sorry, your majesty."
The king sighed. "My wife is beside herself. I spent all night consoling her. Epinard's fate once again hangs in the balance, and I have strange reports flooding in from all across the kingdom... Yet here lies my son, and the doctors tell me there is nothing they can do."

The words bit into Kinshirou's heart, causing him to inhale sharply. "Your majesty, I--"

"Please, Kinshirou, you are wed to my son. You must call me father now," the king fixed him with a sad, exhausted stare. "As my son-in-law, you may well become next in line for the throne, if nothing else can be done. I would accept even magic, nonsense though it is, if it would save my son."

A lump formed in Kinshirou's throat. This felt like the wrong time to be addressing the king as family, yet he hadn't the heart to deny him.

"But father, magic--"

"I know why you sent my nephews back to Perla. Don't let anybody believe you have the Dove Sickness, Kinshirou."

"I'm not insane, your maj--father," Kinshirou drew a shaky breath. "Perla has unearthed strange knowledge. If there's anything that might save Atsushi, I want to try it. Even if it's magic."

The king eyed him. "You believe in it, don't you."

Breaking his gaze, Kinshirou studied Atsushi's pale face. "A wise woman told me I shouldn't deny things I have seen with my own two eyes," he said, thinking of Lisbet. "I believe in logic and reason, but I have seen a lot that I can't explain."

"Apparently so have my scientists," the king sighed. "My academics, my historians-- Can you keep a secret, Kinshirou?"

Kinshirou glanced at him quizzically, his shoulders tensing. "Of course."

Voice lowered, the king leaned forward. "Since of yesterday afternoon, shortly before I heard about Atsushi, I have been receiving word of unexplained new findings. A group of academics found writings about Argent, and historians found records of it. Neither scientists nor doctors can explain these findings, and I'm fearful that the Dove Sickness has reached a more severe stage."

"Could it not be that Argent exists? That it did exist?" Kinshirou corrected himself, wrapping his hand more comfortably around Atsushi's."

"But Argent is a myth. A fairy tale." The king stared hard at him. "Until I see evidence with my own eyes, of Argent's name inscribed in ancient ink, I cannot believe this is any more than a kingdom-wide delusion."

Kinshirou nodded. Proof was everything. It was precisely the reason he'd been in the vaults yesterday, instead of at Atsushi's side, where he should have been.

It was the reason he'd returned when he did, bringing the old ledger.

"Your majesty - father - there's something you must see."

For the first time in hours, Kinshirou rose to his feet and left the room. He had a vague recollection of dropping the ledger on the floor, yet found it placed neatly on the table alongside the maps. He grabbed it, and snatched up one of the maps as an afterthought, not wanting to leave Atsushi's side for any longer than necessary.
When he returned to the bedroom, he found the king leaning over the bed, holding Atsushi's hand, and gently stroking his hair.

"He was always such a good boy," the king said softly. "Even when he did wrong, it was never out of malice."

"He's always been so kind," Kinshirou agreed, pretending not to notice the tears on the man's cheeks. "Everybody loves him, your majesty."

"It's always been that way." Forcing a smile, the king returned to his seat, but retained his grip on his son's hand. "What do you have there?"

"A old map found by En, and a trade ledger, dated from a hundred and twenty years ago. I was looking at this ledger yesterday. It's something I found here that led me to return to the apartment when I did..." his gaze trailed to Atsushi's face, which looked paler than ever.

"What did you find?" the king prompted.

Kinshirou opened the ledger, leafing through the pages. "Many of the entries were only half-filled, the place of origin left blank. Most of that was for trade in silver items, and raw silver for Epinard's craftspeople. I was pondering the omissions when..." he drew a breath. "Those blanks filled themselves in, before my own eyes."

He passed over the ledger, and the king finally let go of Atsushi's hand in order to grasp it.

"November 10th, received two cases of silver..." the king's eyes narrowed as he read the first entry on the page. "Origin: Argent." Suspicious, he rubbed a hand over the entry to test the dryness of the ink. But his fingers caused no smudging, and the old-fashioned script looked as brown and faded as the rest of the page. "This is unbelievable," he uttered. "Give me that map. Let's see what that shows us."

Kinshirou handed it over, trembling inside. The map was a gamble. En had only said he'd found old maps, nothing that showed Argent. But if the kingdom could pop up like magic in the ledgers, maybe it would do so on the maps, too.

As the king unrolled the old vellum, Kinshirou held his breath and looked on.

What they saw there made the king gasp, and Kinshirou sigh in relief.

It was there. Nestled between Perla and Epinard, mountains on two borders and sea on the others, and clearly labelled.

The Kingdom of Argent, Home of Dragons.

"Dragons?" The king sighed and rolled up the map. "I'll send my scientists into the vaults to see what more they can find. How did you know to look there, Kinshirou? Why were you looking there?"

"Atsushi wanted to find this evidence," Kinshirou explained, a renewed sense of guilt creeping up on him. "We knew where to look, because we were told."

"By whom?!"

At that moment, Atsushi drew a particularly ragged breath. Kinshirou was immediately on the bed beside him, kneeling over him as he patted his cheeks and spoke his name.
But Atsushi remained unconscious, and his breathing became shallower.

Head bowed, Kinshirou got back to his feet. At this rate, En and Yumoto wouldn't make it to Perla and back in time. He was cheating them out of their right to say a final goodbye to their cousin—he should have listened to their reasoning!

Yumoto's voice rose unbidden in his head. "There's definitely magic people who can help you."

The king, who had jumped to his feet when Atsushi stirred, slumped down in his chair. "Kinshirou, who told you to look in the vaults? If there's a conspiracy in my kingdom..."

Kinshirou turned to him. "It was no conspirator. It was a...a lunatic who calls herself a witch. And I think she might be Atsushi's last hope."

"Then go, fetch her!" The king was on his feet again. "Bring this woman here immediately! If she can save my son, I'll believe in Argent, in magic, and any other fairy tale you wish to tell me."

"She lives in an asylum. I'll send for her..."

"No. Bring her yourself. Atsushi's condition is being kept secret, Kinshirou, lest my daughter catch wind of it and try to take his place. You must fetch this witch yourself."

Kinshirou stood rooted to the spot, eyes lingering upon Atsushi. He didn't want to leave if he could help it. But leaving could be the only way Atsushi would live.

"Go," said the king. "You have permission to leave the palace. I promise you, Kinshirou, I won't leave his side."

Kinshirou said no more. He departed with a kiss to Atsushi's forehead, and raced away as fast as his legs could carry him, his heart pounding in his ears.

This was Atsushi's only hope. His health was fading fast, and if Lisbet couldn't save him, En and Yumoto may well return too late.

The snow began to fall in the afternoon, drifting gently down from a cloudy sky and melting on the ground. It was the second day of their climb, and as the snowfall began to get heavier and settle around them, Ibushi became more cautious.

"Careful where you tread," he warned Akoya. "The path may get icy."

"I could still try some magic..." Akoya shivered, wrapping his coat more tightly around himself. The weather had changed rapidly since yesterday. Gone were the fair skies and sunlight, gone was the cool night spent beneath a rocky outcrop, kept warm and dry by a fire that kept burning until dawn. Though the day was bright, the sky was thick with clouds, and the snow was forming a pure white blanket that covered the mountain, hiding the path from view. Snow was meant to be pretty, but he was not enjoying it.

"No magic," Ibushi replied, catching the scent of it in the air. "Not until we're clear of the mountains. It's too dangerous."

Akoya pouted. "But it's cold, and we can barely see the path." His ribs hurt, too, still bruised from his encounter with the Creeping Evergreen. But he didn't want to admit that. Ibushi was worried enough about Argent, and the curse was more important than a few bruises.
"We have to keep moving. I can see where the path leads, even though it's covered in snow."

Looking to where he pointed, Akoya saw a smooth indent in the settling snow, which wound further upwards.

"Alright, no magic," he agreed, too cold to complain, and reflecting that he never did find that heat spell.

"I need you to save your magic until we're in Argent," Ibushi said softly, seeing his pout.

"I'm just cold..." Akoya rubbed his hands together, trying to regain some of the feeling in them. The air was so icy that his skin felt numb, his fingers like ice.

Reaching out, Ibushi rook his hands and rubbed them between his own. "Let's walk faster to warm up," he suggested. "Though if the snow keeps falling like this, we'll have to find a shelter and stop early for the night."

"If we stop in this, I'm definitely using magic to start a campfire," Akoya muttered, skin tingling with the warmth of Ibushi's hands.

"That I'll agree to."

"I don't need your approval..." Realising he was taking his mood out on Ibushi, Akoya forced a smile. "But I'm glad to have your guidance," he added.

Ibushi pulled him close, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "I'm just glad to have you here," he said softly. "Come on. Let's try and make it to that ridge up there before the snow gets worse."

Pressed as close to each other as possible, they trudged through the thickening snow, stumbling over hidden rocks, their lungs burning with each intake of ice-cold air.

The snow began to fall thicker, faster, until it was almost impossible to see more than a few paces ahead. Yet still they pressed on, step after step through the frozen, near-invisible landscape.

They were unable to turn back.

There was nothing to turn back to.

Akoya gripped Ibushi's hand tighter, scared. His body was numb with the cold, the only sensation being the tingling warmth from their entwined fingers. He could see nothing but white, could hear nothing but their laboured breaths.

"Can't see..."

"Crouch down," Ibushi tugged him to the ground. "We'll have to feel our way. Hold onto me and don't let go."

Blinded by the snowfall, Akoya felt his way along Ibushi's arm and caught hold of his pack. Together they crawled onwards and upwards, clothes soaked with the snow, breathing heavy. The air wasn't just cold up here, it was thinner, each breath harder to take than the last.

Akoya inhaled deeply. The pain in his ribs caused tears to form at the corner of his eyes, tears that froze in the air and made his eyes sting even worse. He sniffed, forcing his numb, frozen hands to grip onto Ibushi's pack tighter as they crawled onwards. Their pace was slow, and he felt so tired, so cold. He'd never been so cold and exhausted in life, and was sure that if he could rest his eyes for just
a few minutes, he would find the strength to press on.

"Don't stop," Ibushi called out, his voice soft amidst the snowfall. "We're almost there."

"You said that three times already," Akoya protested, through gritted teeth.

"I'm not lying. We're closer than we were before. Last time we were closer than the time before that..."

It was an attempt at a joke, but it only made Akoya grimace. "Are we really almost there?"

"...I don't know. I can't--Yes!" Ibushi's heart flooded with relief. Through the snow, he glimpsed something dark, and saw rocks unblemished by the blizzard. "I see it, Akoya! It's straight ahead!"

With a final burst of energy they scrambled forward, and staggered beneath the rocky overhang of the ridge with sighs of relief.

"F-fire," said Akoya, teeth chattering as he squinted amongst the shadows. A few stammered words, and the area was lit with an orb of light, revealing they were in a small cave. He let his pack fall to the ground and began searching for tinder.

Ibushi sighed, dropping to the floor and throwing off his pack. His hands were red and sore from the ice, and it hurt when he flexed his fingers. Clenching his jaw, he willed his fingers to work as he fumbled with the fastening of his pack. He remembered stories of explorers who had died in the mountains, taken by the ice and snow. He remembered stories of the ones who had survived, too.

He and Akoya needed to get warm and dry before the cold took them.

Nearby, Akoya worked on making a fire. He didn't know the right way to build a proper one, only that if he had enough dry material, he could start a magical fire. His hands felt too cold to manipulate the scattering of twigs on the cave floor, so he kicked them into a pile instead, shivering as he forced out the words to conjure the fire.

At once hot flames leapt up from the pile, bright orange and welcoming.

Akoya's joints ached as he crouched down to warm himself, which was when Ibushi called out to him.

"Come away from the fire."

"What?" He stood up again, wheeling around to stare at him. Ibushi looked tired, his hair and his clothes soaked with snow, his skin red with the cold. Akoya knew he didn't look any better, but he still stared. "Do you want me to freeze to death?" he demanded, incredulous.

"No, but if you warm up too fast, your body will go into shock, and you could die," Ibushi finally got his pack open and pulled out his blanket.

"Then how do you propose we warm up?!

"Get out of those wet clothes, for a start."

If Akoya's cheeks had been frozen, they began to thaw with the blush that rose in them. Ibushi might have seen him naked whilst he was still trapped in the mirror, but that hadn't been intentional. This was different. Throughout their journey so far, he'd always found a way to conceal himself when he changed his clothes--ducking behind a bush or a pile of rocks, or Agneya's protective wing.
There was nothing to hide behind here.

"Hurry up," Ibushi prompted, already undressing himself. He unbuttoned his soaking wet coat with chilled hands, then dropped it aside and tugged off the layer beneath, which was as soaked as his coat was.

"Alright," Akoya sighed, turning away. "But don't look, Ibushi."

A soft laugh echoed through the cave. "We've seen each other naked before."

"Yes, but not at the same time!" Akoya was glad he'd turned his back, because his face was burning. "A-and it was an accident," he added, thinking of how he'd walked in on Ibushi with the tailor.

"Every time?"

"Yes! At least it was on my part!" Akoya threw his coat down and crouched at his pack, pulling out his blanket and wrinkling his nose at how cold and creased his other clothes were.

"You mean you stood naked before me by accident?" Ibushi's voice betrayed amusement.

"Ugh, I was looking at my own reflection, as well you know it!"

"But I could still see..."

Akoya huffed, tugging off the layers he'd piled on beneath his coat, each one as snow-sodden as the last. "You shouldn't have looked," he chastised.

"I couldn't help it."

"You could have closed your eyes..." Akoya still didn't want anyone to look. Not even Ibushi. He didn't like his body. That thought in mind, he clutched his blanket tightly around himself as he wriggled out of his boots and began to peel off his breeches.

"Why would I shut my eyes to something beautiful?" Ibushi asked, voice soft.

"It isn't."

"Well, I think it's beautiful. All of you is beautiful."

Akoya lowered his gaze to the floor, pouting at his chilly toes. His body wasn't beautiful. Ibushi's body was beautiful, all lithe and muscular and strong. His own had never quite been enough of any of those things, his litheness bordering on bony and his muscle tone delicate no matter how much he exercised. He shivered, the cold air sneaking beneath the blanket to caress his bare skin. The fire was warming the cave, but not fast enough for his liking.

"Akoya?"

Daring to peek back at him, Akoya saw that Ibushi had spread out the sleeping mat at the back of the cave, and was sitting on it, huddled up in his blanket.

When their eyes met, Ibushi held the blanket open with one arm, a flush rising in his cheeks behind the redness from the cold. "Come and warm up."

He was naked underneath. Akoya's face became ten times hotter at what it might mean.

"I'm not dressed, Ibushi," he stated, trying to act indifferent.
"You may have noticed I'm naked too." There was a playful twinkle in Ibushi's gaze that Akoya had missed seeing as of late. "The safest way to warm up is through sharing body heat."

Akoya hugged himself beneath his blanket. "You're teasing," he uttered accusingly. "It's hardly the time or the place."

Ibushi averted his gaze, shamefaced. "I was looking for a distraction from this situation," he admitted, indicating the snowstorm that raged outside. "And I might have been teasing, but I'm telling the truth." Dropping his arm, he huddled back beneath the blanket. It was too cold to argue.

Akoya looked at the fire, the flames glowing steadily despite having burned away the tinder it started with. The fire was cheery and inviting, its heat gradually filling the cave. Then he turned and looked again at Ibushi, who huddled there, shivering a little, and gazing miserably out at the snow.

With a sigh, Akoya made his decision and padded closer.

"You'd better be right about body heat," he muttered. "I'm freezing."

Ibushi smiled faintly, opening the blanket once again. "Me too, so hurry."

Akoya briefly clutched his blanket more tightly around himself. "Just don't look!" he demanded.

"I won't look," Ibushi chuckled, turning his head away and closing his eyes. "See. Not looking."

Biting his lip, Akoya slipped beneath Ibushi's blanket, and pulled his own blanket up around them. It was warmer beneath them, so he shifted closer—closer still when Ibushi wrapped an arm around him. The feeling of Ibushi's body against his own wasn't scary, it was comforting, and the heat of Ibushi's skin made his own tingle.

"Can I open my eyes yet?" Ibushi's tone was light, teasing once again.

"Yes," Akoya sighed. Teasing was better than worrying about the snow, and he had to admit it did keep his mind off the cold.

Ibushi opened his eyes and smiled at him. "You're blushing."

"We're naked."

"This is fine, isn't it?"

"Hm..."

"We don't have to be, if you're that uncomfortable." Ibushi's gaze turned serious. "You can get dressed if you're not happy with this."

Akoya shook his head, cheeks turning a deeper shade of pink as he wrapped an arm around Ibushi and pressed closer. "This is the warmest I've been all day," he murmured, pressing his cold nose into the heat of his neck. "This is fine, Ibushi."

"Alright..." Ibushi rested his cheek against Akoya's head. Their climb had been tiring and at one point he was sure they'd both be frozen to the core. But he'd felt warmer the moment Akoya had joined him beneath the blankets.

A smile spread across his face, and he squeezed him. "Imagine the scandal if the court could see us now. Sitting here together, naked and unchaperoned..."
Akoya laughed softly, breath hot against Ibushi's skin. "The gossip would never end."

"Good thing we're not there then, isn't it?"

"Yes, though it would be warmer."

"...Would you rather be at home?"

"No." Akoya lifted his head. "I chose this, Ibushi."

Ibushi raised his brows, a glint in his eye. "You chose falling from a dragon, homicidal trees, and a near death experience with a mountaintop blizzard?"

"Stop joking, I'm serious."

"And I'm trying to forget about this situation we're in," a faint smile formed on Ibushi's lips. "And distract you from the fact we're both naked under here."

"You said it was fine, didn't you?"

"This is fine. The blizzard isn't. We're effectively trapped here."

"And you've had enough of being trapped."

"Yes," Ibushi gazed out at the snow, hunching further beneath the blanket. "I'm sorry to have dragged you into this. You should be at home, safe and warm and happy."

Akoya pouted at him. "I told you, I chose this. I chose you." He reached up, snaking a hand from beneath the blanket to finger-comb through Ibushi's damp hair. "If I must be in this situation, there's nobody else I'd rather be here with."

Ibushi caught hold of Akoya's hand, pressing a kiss to his palm before he drew it back beneath the blankets, out of the cold. Akoya's words warmed him from the inside, the heat spreading from his chest to his stomach, and to the roots of his hair and the tips of his toes. And he suddenly became conscious of how naked he was, and how naked Akoya was, and the fact it was here, and they were together, and Akoya had just told him he was choosing to be there. He smiled faintly, understanding what it meant.

It meant that he was trusted.

If he wasn't, Akoya would never had burrowed beneath the blankets with him.

"I love you," he whispered.

Akoya smiled, gaze heavy-lidded. "I love you too, Ibushi."

Their lips met gently at first, slow and searching, the raging of the blizzard forgotten.

And as kisses became deeper and bodies pressed closer and grew warm, the magic-born flames of the fire burned brighter, a beacon of heat amidst the cold.

The sky was turning dark when Kinshirou burst into Lisbet's room at the asylum. Too impatient to wait, he'd run ahead of the warden, who was too slow for his liking.
Lisbet was already on her feet, her hair and her clothes clean and tidy and her bed made, as if she knew what was coming.

"Your highness," she said, curtseying. "I'm needed?"

Assuming she'd heard his shouting downstairs, Kinshirou nodded. "His majesty requires you at the palace."

Lisbet gave him one of her hard stares, then her brow wrinkled. "This is a matter of extreme urgency."

"Atsushi has been poisoned," Kinshirou whispered, heart thumping hard. "It must be kept secret. You're his last hope."

"Then you must get me out of here, and fast. We mustn't lose any time."

"The warden is bringing your own clothes."

"We don't have time for that, this uniform will do. I'll take my boots and my cloak, and you can send your fancy coach home, because I must gather supplies on the way."

"Tell me what you need. I'll have it collected." Kinshirou paced the room impatiently. "Where is that damn warden?!"

Lisbet glanced at the door. "On the stairs. I need to gather supplies myself. Your staff won't know what to look for."

Kinshirou stopped pacing and frowned at her. "I'm placing his life in your hands, Miss--"

"Ah, here comes Mister Warden," Lisbet interrupted, clapping her hands. A moment later the man stepped into the room, bearing a wooden box of her belongings.

"Your garments, Miss Carmine," he said, with pleasantry that didn't match his expression.

The woman snatched up her boots immediately and stepped into them. They appeared to lace themselves as she drew her cloak around her shoulders, and whilst the warden spluttered at the sight, Kinshirou pretended not to notice.

"His majesty is waiting," he reminded her.

"And that won't do at all," replied Lisbet. Upending the box on the bed, she tucked it under her arm. "Lead the way."

"Oi, that box is asylum property!" protested the warden.

Kinshirou scowled coldly at him. "This is the king's business, and you'll be reimbursed."

Turning on his heel, he grasped Lisbet's elbow and propelled her down the stairs and out into the street.

Lisbet took a deep breath of air as they stepped outside, gaze cast up to the sky.

"Autumn," she breathed. "A time of change. Which means we must hurry."

She set off down the street without waiting for Kinshirou, unmindful of the citizens who pointed and stared and dodged away from her in her asylum uniform.
Shouting to the carriage to return to the palace, Kinshirou hurried after her.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"It's too complicated for non-magical folk, too much to explain in such--aha!" She darted across the road, crouching at the side of a old timber shed. The wall was green with moss, and she eagerly scraped away a portion of it with a flint from the ground. Popping the moss and the flint into her box, she turned around and headed back down the street.

"The palace is in the other direction!" Kinshirou called, giving chase.

"Yes, and what I need is in this direction."

"How do you even know that? You had best not be toying with me, else you'll be thrown straight back in the asylum."

"I'm not toying with you, and I'm aware of how grave the circumstances are." Lisbet clambered up onto a gate and reached into the tree beside it, giving the nearest branch a good shake. Several nuts fell down, and she motioned to them. "Pick five," she said, jumping down and carrying on along the street without him.

Kinshirou was quick to fill his pockets with what she asked for, and followed as fast as he could. She led him this way and that, pausing occasionally as if listening, sometimes doubling back on herself. Kinshirou watched as she filled the box with more moss, and strange-looking toadstools, and things that he didn't recognise, but certainly didn't want anywhere near Atsushi.

As the sun touched the horizon, she turned to him and nodded. "Sunset. The perfect time to get started."

Patience running thin, Kinshirou ushered her swiftly through the streets, and toward the palace.

The king jumped to his feet when Kinshirou and Lisbet entered the room. The queen was there too, sitting on the bed beside Atsushi, her fingers weaving through his hair.

She looked at Lisbet with eyes bloodshot from crying. "Can you save my son?" she asked weakly.

Lisbet curtseyed. "I'll do my best, your majesty."

"Please," said the king. "Do all you can."

Setting down her box, Lisbet rounded the bed and pressed a hand to Atsushi's chest. She frowned, and leaned over him, lifting his eyelids to peer at his eyes and opening his mouth to sniff at his breath. Lips a grim line, she pulled back. "I need space to work, and I need privacy," she stated. "I need your majesties to leave. His highness must stay."

"Why Kinshirou?" demanded the queen. "This is my own son!"

"Yes, why me?" asked Kinshirou.

Lisbet picked up her box. "Your bond isn't through blood. You're the only person who can give him what he needs."

The queen bristled at this. "But surely a mother--"
"Come, sweetheart," the king held out a hand. "This is for Atsushi's sake."

Reluctant, the queen allowed her husband to lead her from the apartment.

Once they were gone, Kinshirou turned to Lisbet. "What do you need?"

"Bowl, pestle, mortar, knife, kettle, an empty bottle, a teacup, and whatever tea his highness most likes to drink."

The items she requested were brought to the room within minutes, by which time she had already got to work, using whatever was to hand as a makeshift tool. At the bedside, Kinshirou looked on as she crushed rocks and ground up nuts, and chopped up all the strange unknown things into tiny little pieces. Lisbet hummed as she worked, and murmured old words each time she added something to the bowl.

Finally the curiosity became too much.

"Is this magic?" he asked.

"A little magic, a little forgotten medicine." A handful of something green and slimy went into the bowl, mixed with bare hands and a muttering of words.

Kinshirou watched in mild disgust. "You said I'm the only person who can give him what he needs. What does that mean?"

"Love."

"That's nonsensical."

Lisbet snorted. "It's perfectly logical. You love him because you want to, not because of blood or politics."

"That still makes no sense. Everybody chooses to love."

"That's true, but few love selflessly, which is why it is so powerful."

Kinshirou looked away, studying his and Atsushi's hands instead. "My love isn't selfless," he said, thinking of how he'd tried to spurn Atsushi, before they were engaged.

"Yet you wished you could take his fate as your own in order to save him." Lisbet smirked triumphantly when he stared at her. "See? Selfless. Which is why you have to administer the antidote, and seal it with a kiss."

"Now that really is nonsense."

"Is it? Or is it an old magic worth trying for the sake of your beloved's life?"

With a flourish, Lisbet poured the steaming hot contents of the kettle into the bowl, and tossed in a handful of Atsushi's favourite tea. The contents of the bowl seemed to pop and fizz as steam rose from it, and the smell of strawberries filled the air. Once the smoke had cleared, she emptied the bowl into the bottle, and then poured some of the contents into the teacup.

"The first dose is the hardest," she said, handing it to Kinshirou. "Pour it into his mouth, and seal it with a kiss, and be strong, not afraid."

"This will save him?" Kinshirou curled his hands around the cup, looking dubiously at the
luminescent purple liquid within.

"One dose now, and a cupful every night until the bottle is empty." Lisbet smiled and placed a hand on his arm. "I shall leave you to play your part alone."

Her touch was somehow soothing to Kinshirou's heart, and she smiled again as if she knew it to be so.

"Strong, not afraid," she reminded him.

"Thank you," Kinshirou whispered.

She slipped soundlessly from the room, closing the door behind her.

Trembling, Kinshirou turned to Atsushi's prone form.

Atsushi looked peaceful as he climbed onto the bed beside him, as if he was merely sleeping. Supporting his head with one hand, Kinshirou held the rim of the teacup to his slightly-parted lips, and poured the contents into his mouth. A droplet of the liquid lingered at the edge of his lips, and Kinshirou grimaced.

*Seal it with a kiss*, Lisbet had said.

He'd seen what went into the potion, and it looked disgusting, but he couldn't be squeamish about it now. This was for Atsushi's sake.

Leaning down, he brought his lips to Atsushi's in a soft, desperate kiss, wishing with all his heart that he would wake up, that he would live.

Atsushi remained unresponsive, and Kinshirou sat up with a sigh.

"Please, Atchan," he whispered, tears sliding down his cheeks and dripping onto Atsushi's face. "Please wake up now."

Atsushi twitched, his eyes flickering open.

Then he let out a low moan, and Kinshirou looked on in horror as Atsushi's eyes rolled back in his head, and his body began to convulse violently against the mattress.
Comfortable and warm, Ibushi and Akoya had slept, snuggled close within their nest of blankets. The blizzard continued to rage outside, unrelenting and cruel, but the deathly cold was kept at bay by the fire, which burned brightly even as they slumbered.

Ibushi awoke to the sound of the flames crackling and the heat of Akoya's body against his own, and fought against the rush of anxiety that surged forth to plague his thoughts. He sighed, pressing his face against Akoya's shoulder and willing himself back to sleep. A moment like this, so intimate and tender, was a time for stillness and tranquillity, for enjoying this sleepy warmth, this togetherness.

Yet he was already thinking about their journey. The wind howled across the mountains outside, and he knew their path would be difficult, dangerous--and deadly, if they didn't keep their wits about them.

They had only survived the climb this far out of sheer luck. Whilst crawling through the snow to seek their path, Ibushi had begun to think they would never make it. Of course, he hadn't told Akoya that. Akoya would have been terrified. He probably would have tried using magic, and Ibushi didn't know where that might have led them. Into an avalanche, maybe, or a landslide. Into death. It hadn't been a time for magic. The world about them had been too unstable.

Not that he was entirely against the use of magic. The summoning of their fire had certainly saved their lives. Maybe they'd have to risk using it amidst the snow, too, if they wanted to get out of here.

Finally opening his eyes, Ibushi saw a number of shapes floating over the flames. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, vision sharpening to reveal that the shapes were their clothes.

"Good morning," Akoya murmured, attention fixed upon the garments. "At least, I think it's morning."

Not wanting to distract him, Ibushi kissed his jaw. "Good morning will do."

"The blizzard is still going."

"We're safe and dry, at least."

"We're trapped." The clothes faltered in the air, and Akoya cleared his throat, concentrating harder on them. He'd been too cold last night to think about how stuck they were. Now, rested and warm, the reality of their situation was frightening. The snow fell too hard for them to proceed, but they couldn't stay in this cave indefinitely.

Ibushi squeezed him. "Maybe we'll have to use magic," he said.
"But I don't know how to stop a blizzard."

"Let's eat and try to work something out."

The clothes floated over to them, and Akoya tested them for dryness. "We can dress, at least," he said.

"That's a start..." Ibushi nuzzled his neck and kissed his shoulder. "This is nice, though."

Akoya flushed. "We can't stay like this," he protested mildly. He'd woken to find his skin tingling like it had when Ibushi had drawn him close last night, and it only intensified when Ibushi kissed him. Arms settling around his shoulders, he smiled. "Well, maybe for a while longer."

When they finally rose from the blankets and started to dress, Akoya's skin still tingled from the warmth of Ibushi's body against his own, despite the fact they were no longer touching. Keeping his blanket wrapped around himself as he pulled on dry, warm clothes, he reflected that it felt rather like an intense sensation of magic.

Actually, it felt exactly like magic.

Now he thought about it, there was something not entirely normal about the feeling. This wasn't the heated, tremulous thrill of Ibushi's touch. This was the prickly tingle of magic, and Akoya was appalled with himself for not noticing it sooner.

In a hurry, he pulled on his boots and buttoned his coat, and edged towards the mouth of the cave.

"Be careful," Ibushi warned.

Akoya looked back to see him pulling on his shirt, and flushed at the enticing contours of his torso. It was a sight he would never get tired of.

"I'm just checking something," he said, and stepped out into the snow.

The blizzard winds screamed across the landscape, splattering him with heavy snow.

He shuddered at the cold, but this time he paid closer attention: the air crackled with magic just as it had in the forest. Hair rising on the back of his neck, he shivered and retreated back into the cave.

"You're soaked already!" Ibushi abandoned the task of buttoning his coat and tugged him beside the fire. "What did you do that for?"

"My skin wouldn't stop tingling."

"So you thought you'd freeze it off?" Ibushi rubbed at his hands, already red with the cold.

Akoya shook his head. "I thought it was because of you. From when we were..." he blushed. "When we were warming up."

"Well it's nice to know I make you tingle," Ibushi grinned, trying to make light of the matter. It seemed being naked together was still a point of embarrassment for him, no matter how pleasant it had been.

"Not like that. It's magic."
"Magic..." Ibushi sighed. "I should have known. I could smell it on the air."

"Why didn't you say so before?!"

"I thought it was you!"

Akoya's brows rose. "I smell like magic?"

"Well, among other things," Ibushi smiled at him fondly, though his expression grew serious when he looked out at the snow. It was still dangerous, but knowing it was caused by magic made him feel less helpless. "Now we know it's magic, we can deal with it."

"How? I told you, I don't know how to stop a blizzard."

"But this is a magic blizzard."

"Ibushi, there is definitely nothing in my books about ending a magic blizzard. Magic might be fairly simple, but there's a lot of snow to deal with out there."

"But it's still snow... and snow melts..." Ibushi looked at the fire. "Can you make this bigger? Much bigger?"

Akoya shook his head. "I don't know. Not big enough to melt all that snow, anyway."

"Could you try?"

The fire was growing larger, even as he asked. Soon enough the flames were licking the roof of the cave, and Ibushi pulled Akoya backwards, away from it.

"Maybe move it outside?" he suggested.

Akoya took a breath. "I could use some help with that. You know levitation. I can't do that and grow the fire."

"Right." Ibushi laced their fingers together and murmured the spell. The fire didn't move as quickly as he wanted, but slowly it edged out of the cave mouth, expanding all the while.

The flames hissed when they met the snow, and Akoya growled, gripping his hand tighter. His heart thumped. Standing there, he almost felt as though he was the fire. He could feel the snow melting on impact with the flames, could feel the water drip off the side.

All around the fire, the snow melted to reveal the wet grey rocks beneath. It floated there before the cave mouth, an orb of flame the size of a carriage, hissing and fizzing in the blizzard.

But Akoya couldn't make it grow anymore, and maintaining it was making him weary.

"Bigger," Ibushi murmured.

"I can't."

"Just a little more. You can do it."

"Ugh..."

With one last burst of energy, the fireball swelled, juddering in the air as Ibushi focused all his attention on keeping it afloat. It shot upward, and there was a loud pop as it disappeared into the
clouds.

Akoya blinked. "What--"

A boom rang out, the ground trembling as the sky turned to fire.

Then the fire cleared, and a gentle rain began to fall in place of the snow.

"I had a hunch," Ibushi grinned. "And it worked."

"Well then," said Akoya. "We're free again."

After eating a quick meal - a small meal, from worryingly few supplies - they packed up the last of their things and found their way back to the mountain path. The rain had stopped now, and the sky was clear, but the air was still cold, still thin. Snow lingered on the ground, turned grey and slushy in the rain, and icy beneath their footsteps. They both slipped more than once, and as Akoya lost his footing again and thumped to the ground, he let out a groan.

"Are you hurt?"

Ibushi held out a hand, and he hoisted himself up.

"I'm fine," he said, absently rubbing his ribs.

"You should be careful of those bruises..." Ibushi paced carefully up the path, heading for the brow of the hill.

Akoya stopped and stared at him. It was true he had bruises on his ribs, thanks to his run-in with that damn tree, but how did Ibushi know--

Akoya scowled. "You looked!" he shouted, hurrying after him as his cheeks began to burn.

"I couldn't exactly help but look." There was a smirk in Ibushi's voice.

"You said you wouldn't!"

"And I kept my word. Until this morning, when you rolled over and I saw."

"Oh. That couldn't be helped, I suppose." Akoya caught up, falling into step with him. He inhaled deeply, wincing as he tried to catch his breath.

As they reached the crest of the hill, Ibushi turned, pulling him to a stop.

"Are you in pain?" There was concern in his eyes, and he pressed a warm hand to Akoya's side.

Akoya shook his head, hand over Ibushi's. "They're just bruises. I'll be alright, once they heal."

"I'd tell you to rest, but this is hardly the place. Are you sure you're not in pain?"

"I'm sure."

"Please tell me if you are, Akoya. I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine, honestly." Akoya glanced away and took a sharp breath, eyes widening slightly as he pressed their hands to his ribs. "Ibushi!"

Ibushi's eyes narrowed. "You are in pain! Akoya, you must tell me these things!"
Akoya shook his head. "No, look!"

Turning to see where he pointed, Ibushi gasped.

For beyond the mountains was a sight he had dreamed of for months: sprawling countryside and homely thatched cottages, and sturdy stone towers rising up in the distance.

It was Argent.

He was home.

The dispatch from the royal court of Gaia arrived two days after Kinshirou's last, desperate attempt to save Atsushi's life. The message bore happy news, a relief from the sombre mood that had settled within the palace walls.

King Kinugawa had ensured that the truth about his son was kept under wraps. After all, there was a poisoner in their midst, yet to be caught. As far as the rest of the palace knew, Atsushi was shut away in his apartment, suffering from a mild autumn illness.

The people of the palace assumed this was the king's way of saying his heir had the Dove Sickness, and murmured among themselves about what might happen if no cure was found.

Still, the message from Gaia raised the spirits of those who didn't know the truth.

"Their Majesties King Naruko of Gaia and Queen Regent Zaou of Vesta are happy to announce the engagement of their heirs, Prince Io and Prince Ryuu. Through this union, may the people of our kingdoms prosper."

Kinshirou had heard the announcement along with everybody else, and though he wanted to be glad for Ryuu and Io, he couldn't help envy their peace, their happiness. Nobody in Gaia had evil intentions towards them. There was no poisoned cake on their table, no doctors dropping by daily only to shake their heads out of cluelessness.

A letter had come with the royal dispatch, addressed to Kinshirou and Atsushi, and it sat there another day before Kinshirou had the heart to open it.

"You will have heard the announcement for yourselves," it said, in Ryuu's surprisingly tidy handwriting. "But I wanted to write to you directly. It's more personal this way, and there are some other things I wanted to write about.

But first, the wedding. It will happen next year, in the summer. We haven't decided upon the exact date, but it's probably going to happen in June. Io says it's a favourable time for official memorabilia, and it will bring lots of trade into Gaia. I don't understand that stuff, and I don't think he's really considering it from a trade perspective, even if he says he is.

It was a day in June that we first met, you see, and Io has always been secretly sentimental..."

Kinshirou skimmed over the next page and a half. Ryuu had written extensively about his first meeting with Io, how he'd come to fall in love with him, and how happy he was that they were to marry. It hurt to read, knowing that he and Atsushi had wasted so much time just being friends before they became lovers. It hurt even worse to think that they could have avoided so much heartache, if only they'd been honest about their relationship from the start.
If they’d told Atsushi’s parents from the beginning, everything would have been different. Atsushi wouldn’t have been poisoned, and Kinshirou wouldn’t have failed him.

Heaving a sigh, he glanced towards the room in which Atsushi lay. The door was ajar, and the bottle of Lisbet's potion stood on the shelf inside, as disgusting as ever. Kinshirou couldn't believe he'd poured it down Atsushi's throat, let alone kissed him afterwards.

The memory made his heart feel heavy, and he resumed reading where he left off, needing to distract his thoughts.

"Anyway, Io just saw this and said it's really embarrassing, so I'll stop. He said I should tell you we heard about the plague in Epinard. Is everything alright there? A merchant from Epinard told us about it, and laughed at the idea that Argent exists. His jokes didn't go down so well in the Gaian court. Some people believe in it, and some have been having dreams, too. But it's not being treated like a plague here, or like madness. Io put some researchers to work, and said they all found similar stories about a lost kingdom that 'went under'. That's got to be this curse, right?

I hope Akoya is doing alright with that quest of his. He's got some magic, and he's got Ibushi and the dragon, but it's seriously crazy to think that will be enough to wake an entire kingdom from its longest ever nap.

...Heh, if anyone intercepted this letter in Epinard they'd think I was mad. I'm not, of course!

I guess you two are busy right now, being newlyweds in Atsushi's kingdom. You've got a royal tour to do, right? Make sure you come and visit us soon. Io and I only have each other to talk to about this and everything that happened in Perla, and we're getting frustrated with that. Even with the evidence of magic that has come to light here, a lot of people don't believe our stories and think we're making things up.

Hope we can all get together soon. It's more fun with a group!

Take care,

Ryuu."

Kinshirou folded the letter and tossed it onto the desk. If only Ryuu knew what had been going on. It wouldn't have changed what had happened, but he certainly wouldn't have written so carelessly. It was fortunate, really, that Ryuu's letter hadn't been intercepted, else Kinshirou would be facing questions he really didn't have the strength to answer.

Tired, he leaned back in the chair and rubbed his hands over his face. A visit to Gaia would have been a good idea, if not for Atsushi.

He rested his chin in his hand and looked at the papers on the desk. Atsushi's diary was there, leather-bound and worn. Atsushi had written in it often, slipping little mementos between the pages: pressed flowers, love notes, invitations. The diary was so stuffed with these little extras that it had to be held shut with a length of cord.

It was stuffed with Atsushi's thoughts, too, and Kinshirou longed for the sight of him sitting and writing in it. Sometimes, Atsushi had written of happy occasions that he wanted to remember. Sometimes, he'd used the diary to exorcise his worst worries and fears.

If only they'd taken those fears more seriously, he might never have been poisoned.

Slipping the diary from its place, Kinshirou opened it at the first blank page, and took up a pen.
Atsushi had always liked to keep a record of what went on in his life, but he was unable to write what happened this time.

But Kinshirou could—and he was desperate to pour out the contents of his heart somewhere that nobody would see.

The two and a half days it took to climb down the mountain passed in a blur. Climbing down turned out to be harder than climbing up, the pathway steep and slippery with ice. Since bringing an end to the blizzard, no more magic halted their progress. The ground was firm and dry and the weather was fair, and the air was cool and fresh.

Ibushi had been in high spirits as they began their descent, joking and teasing and doing his best to make Akoya blush.

Yet by the time they reached the foot of the mountain, he'd become quiet and introspective. They may have reached Argent, but he was still far from the palace, and they had yet to discover how to awaken the kingdom.

Time had frozen for Argent during the winter and the trees were bare, their barren branches reaching into the sky. It was a far cry from the golden forests of Perla.

There was a bird in the nearest tree, its feathers puffed out and its eyes closed, magic-induced sleep undisturbed as they passed by. The road they were on was well-kept and clean, but the world about them slumbered onward.

"Argent is very picturesque," Akoya commented softly, catching hold of his hand. Ibushi's quietness hadn't escaped his notice, and his frown worried him.

"I wish you could see it from the air..." Ibushi looked up, imagining the flight paths of dragons. "You can see all the way to the palace, if you go high enough."

"Please show me sometime."

"Of course. I'd love to..." A sigh escaped Ibushi's lips, and he trudged away without finishing his sentence. 'If we break the curse', he wanted to say. But he didn't want Akoya to misunderstand. He had faith in him, even if he was losing hope that they'd succeed.

Reaching a little cottage, he stopped and peered in the window. There was an old woman slumped in a rocking chair, a dog curled up at her feet, and a girl crumpled beside the hearth, a pan of water in her hand that had long turned cold. Ibushi pursed his lips, feeling that he was prying even though they would never know he was there.

"Ibushi?" Akoya had continued along the way a little, but stopped when he reached a crossroads, and turned back. "I don't know where we're going. You need to lead the way."

"Hm." Ibushi stepped back from the cottage and grasped his hand again, leading him onward.

They passed so many cottages along the way, and all were the same: the occupants sleeping, unaware of their presence, snoring in chairs and stretched over half-dug gardens and amidst laundry hung up to dry.

After a while, Akoya stopped peeping through windows, and tried not to look at the houses altogether. It was eerie to see the kingdom a-slumber, when spiders and birds and humans alike all
remained so still and lost to dreams.

He tried not to let Ibushi look, either. Ibushi had fallen silent now, unresponsive to his attempts at conversation. He'd turned pale, his expression tired and sad, and he no longer walked with his head held high. Ibushi looked like a man broken by his circumstances, and Akoya longed to make him smile.

Head down, he kept a tight grip on his hand, tugging him forward every time his footsteps began to slow. They walked for miles, backs aching and feet sore, through one village and into the next, past houses and shops and farmland.

Then Ibushi stopped walking completely, and let out an agonised groan.

Akoya looked up, and saw what Ibushi had seen. There was large field beside the road, half-ploughed by a slumbering farmer and horse. And just beyond them, the broken husk of dragon, its wings bent and twisted, the ground churned up where its body had crashed and skidded to a halt. Akoya was far from an expert on dragons, but he could see that this one would never awaken. Its limbs were too broken, and its neck...

He turned away, nausea rising in his stomach.

It was too much to behold.

Ibushi let out a shaky breath and pushed his fingers through his hair, staring at the sight before him.

"No..." he whispered. Climbing over the low fence, he ran towards the broken remains of the dragon, stumbling over the ploughed furrows of the field as he went. He passed the sleeping farmer and his horse, and pressed his hands desperately to the dragon's flank, seeking a heartbeat, seeking heat, anything that would tell him that he was wrong and the dragon was still alive.

Faded blue scales crumbled beneath his touch.

Pressing a hand to his mouth, Ibushi choked back a sob. The word was so cruel. This curse was so cruel! This poor, magnificent dragon had once been a king of the sky, only to be forced into unnatural sleep, to fall to death through a curse born of vengeance that had nothing to do with dragonkind!

A pair of arms wrapped around him and he sank into Akoya's embrace, squeezing his eyes tightly shut to the horrific scene. This was something he'd feared ever since awakening within the mirror. Who knew how many innocent dragons had perished this way. Those magnificent creatures would never again stretch their wings or soar through the skies, and Ibushi's chest ached to think of all the lives that had been lost.

"I'm sorry, Ibushi." Akoya held him tightly, sickened by the sight of the dead body. "It's horrible, I know..."

"It's unforgivable," Ibushi uttered, trembling against him. "And the ones who did this are long gone. They'll never face justice."

Akoya rubbed his back. "They won't, and it's not fair," he whispered, voice trembling. "But we'll break this curse, Ibushi, and that will be your vengeance. There will be dragons in the skies of Argent once more."

"We don't even know how to break the curse," Ibushi lifted his head, his eyes tearful.
Akoya cringed inwardly at his words. The sight of Ibushi's tears made him ache--and it was an angry ache. Ibushi was too strong a person to cry easily. The fate of his kingdom was in their hands, and though those behind it would never be brought to justice, their curse could still be broken.

Akoya didn't just want to break the curse, he wanted to obliterate it.

Filled with a new determination, he kissed Ibushi's forehead. "We'll find a way," he whispered. "I promise you."

Ibushi gazed at him tiredly. "Should you promise something you can't guarantee?" he asked.

"Ibushi..." Akoya brought their lips together with a sigh, summoning up memories of their night in the cave and willing the warmth and calm of those moments into Ibushi's heart. He rested their heads together when he broke the kiss, speaking in a soft tone. "I can promise you that I'll spend my life trying."

The statement made Ibushi swallow hard, a new warmth in his chest. For a long moment he clung to him, breathing deeply as he tried to regain his composure.

"Akoya," he murmured. "You--"

"Oi, what you doin' in my field?! Trampin' round like you own the--Your highness?!

They looked up in shock at the new voice, to find the farmer stomping across the field towards them, rubbing his eyes in disbelief. The man dropped to one knee as he neared them, bowing in the old-fashioned manner that Akoya had found so charming when Ibushi did it.

"What's your highness doing in my own humble field eh?" That farmer asked. "Is that your dragon?! What happened?!"

"I...uh..." Ibushi faltered in his explanation, wiping his eyes and sheepishly pulling away from Akoya. "A lot has happened," he replied, pulse racing. "Perhaps more than you care to hear about."

Across the field, the horse strolled to munch on some grass at the perimeter, the plough clinking behind as it churned up a long, uneven furrow through the soil.

The farmer yawned, rising on Ibushi's signal. "Forgive me for nodding off at work, I must've looked a fool. What happened to your dragon?"

"It..." Ibushi gulped.

"It isn't ours," Akoya said. "It fell from the sky, and we found it like this."

"Looks like it's been there for some time," said the farmer, looking suspicious. "Wasn't there a moment ago. Is this some kind of magic?"

"A curse," Akoya's expression was grim.

Ibushi nodded, heart pounding. The farmer was awake. The horse was awake. The area was a little remote, and he couldn't see anybody else nearby, but surely this meant the curse was broken!

"The whole kingdom was sent to sleep," he explained, voice growing stronger. "Every living thing has slumbered for a hundred years."

The farmer blinked. "Well, that explains why I feel so hungry!" He paused and rubbed his eyes. "I'm not still dreaming, am I?"
"You're awake. You should go home to your family," Ibushi advised, thinking of his own home, his own family, and longing to see them again.

"If you say so... The wife's never going to believe this. Have to go look for her out with the cows. Honestly, the Prince of Argent in our own fields, it's like I'm still dreaming..." The farmer shook his head and began to wander off, calling to his horse.

"Wait!" Ibushi called out. "I have a request of you."

Ten minutes later, he and Akoya were sitting astride the horse, the countryside whizzing past as they galloped along the road. Ibushi's face was determined, and he spurred the horse on to run faster, eager to reach the palace.

Kinshirou had been napping when the summons came. He'd not slept properly for days, too uptight to do anything but lay there and try to escape from inescapable thoughts. Too afraid of potions, he'd refused any kind of sleeping remedy. His only relief was in the times his body was too tired to stay awake, in moments he sat down and attempted to read only for his head to nod and his eyes to slide closed of their own accord.

Such had happened this time, and when the knock sounded at the door he jerked awake, his book falling to the floor with a smack.

Struggling through his gogginess, he went to the door and received the message: a summons from the king, for the princess was on her way to the palace.

Wearily, he agreed and went to prepare.

It didn't take long for his mind to regain its usual sharpness, despite how tired he was. The cold water he washed his face in helped to wake him, and on the walk down to the throne room, he pondered deeply on what the princess wanted now. Noriko was cold and cunning, and desperate to secure her right to the throne. Last time, she and her slimy, cruel bishop husband had been sent away disappointed. Doubtless she'd found a new reason to grasp for the throne, never mind that the marriage had placed him, a foreigner, ahead of her in lineage. Kinshirou had always thought that Epinard's laws concerning the throne were odd, but the law was still the law, and had to be upheld.

Besides, he'd seen some of the pamphlets the princess and her bishop distributed amongst the people. Their doctrine was harsh and unforgiving, hateful of non-believers, of foreigners, of marriage that could not produce offspring, and anything else that didn't conform to their strict, rigid beliefs. The people wouldn't like that. If Noriko claimed the throne, the kingdom would come to war.

Kinshirou wasn't prepared to let that happen. This was Atsushi's kingdom, and his peace-loving husband had always wanted his people to be free and happy.

"Ah Kinshirou, I'm glad you arrived first," said the king, as Kinshirou was shown into the room. He gave a wry smile. "I'm afraid my daughter is at it again."

"She just won't let the matter drop," sighed the queen. She sat regally upon her throne, though it was clear by her expression that she, too, had slept poorly of late. "And at a time like this..."

"Whatever she has come up with this time, it won't change a thing," the king said.

Kinshirou nodded. "The laws of Epinard are clear," he agreed.
At that moment the doors were thrown open, and Princess Noriko strode in before the aide had a chance to announce her. Bishop Limace hurried in behind her, and she didn't falter for a moment as she approached the thrones.

The guards, however, were wary, and stepped in her way before she could reach her parents.

Noriko took a step back and threw up her hands. "May I not greet my parents with a kiss upon the cheek?!" she demanded.

"Why are you here, Noriko?" asked the king, ignoring the question. Still, he signalled to the guards to stand down.

"Why? I heard about Atsushi, of course!" The woman's eyes grew wide. "My poor brother! What on earth is to be done?!"

The queen's gaze grew cold. "Nothing is to be done, Noriko."

Bishop Limace stepped forward, expression grave yet unfeeling. "But after what happened, something must be done." He looked accusingly towards Kinshirou.

"Yes," agreed Noriko. "We can't leave the destiny of our kingdom to an interloper who was not even wed on Epinardian soil."

"Now Noriko, we've been through this," the king sighed. "The law states that the spouse of an heir is entitled to the throne in their stead, and you know as well as the rest of us that Kinshirou has spent a vast amount of time in these palace halls. He is hardly a stranger."

"And you trust him, after what happened?" Noriko effected a dramatic sigh, hands on her hips. "It's obvious what really went on! This...this criminal," she motioned to Kinshirou. "Is responsible for what happened to my poor, dear brother! And no criminal can take the throne, which clearly makes me the heir."

Kinshirou frowned at that, guilt rising in his chest. "It wasn't my fault," he began. "I only--"

"You only fed him poisoned cake, and stood there heartlessly as he fell to the ground!" Noriko sneered. "Murderer!"

The queen let out a gasp.

Kinshirou shook his head. "It wasn't me," he protested.

"It was," Noriko insisted. "Who else would it have been?! It was you! My brother is dead--or dying, it doesn't matter which, for he'll be dead soon enough. And you are a criminal, which means I am going to be next on the throne!"

"The only place you are going," came a voice, weak and sad, "is prison...sister."

Noriko whirled around, and let out a shout of fury when she saw Atsushi. The prince was wrapped in his dressing gown, and leaned heavily on Lisbet's arm as she helped him into the room.

"This is impossible!" Noriko exclaimed. "I... I was told you're dying!"

"What's impossible is you knew that Atsushi was poisoned, and how," Kinshirou said, walking over to assist his husband.

"The whole town knows about it," Noriko sniffed.
"I've heard enough," the king got to his feet. "Guards! Arrest her--and the bishop."

As the guards stepped towards them, the bishop turned and ran for the door.

Kinshirou leapt on him immediately, tackling him to the floor. They fell with a thump, and the bishop let out an angry shout.

"Unhand me! Disgusting, unnatural interloper!"

"You're disgusting," Kinshirou growled, nails digging into the man's wrists as he pinned him down. "Your beliefs are foul and unjust, and they're not welcome. You conspired to murder my husband, for the sake of spreading your cruelty, and for that, you deserve no better than to--"

"Kinchan." Atsushi's hand rested on Kinshirou's shoulder, soothing his anger. "The guards can take over now."

Relinquishing the bishop to the guards, Kinshirou returned to Atsushi's side. "It's good to see you up," he said softly. "I wasn't going to disturb you with this."

"He needed to be present," Lisbet said sternly. "I foresaw this."

"That's why you advised we keep the poisoning a secret," Kinshirou realised.

"Exactly. I knew the guilty would return to the scene, and make their mistake..."

They watched the bishop and Noriko being manhandled from the room. Noriko was still protesting her innocence, but in revealing she knew about the cake, she had sealed both her fate, and that of her husband.

Atsushi let out a sigh when the doors closed, and leaned tiredly against Kinshirou. "I never realised how much she hated me."

Kinshirou wrapped an arm around him, supporting his weight. "Nobody could hate you, Atchan."

"She is simply mad for power," agreed Lisbet. "And I know a lot about madness, being mad myself."

"You're far from mad, Miss Carmine," said the queen, rising. "Once Atsushi is better, we must speak at length about this magic of yours."

Atsushi stared at his mother. "I thought you didn't believe in magic," he said. "What with the Dove Sickness..."

"We've seen magic, son," the king offered his arm to the queen, and they approached the little group. "Magic saved your life where medicine could not."

"But the stories of Argent..."

"Are true, apparently. It's in our records."

If Atsushi hadn't felt so weak, he might have jumped for joy at what this meant. Instead, he just let out a quiet laugh. "I've missed a lot, while I've been stuck in bed--Kinchan, you should have told me."

Kinshirou shook his head. "You needed to rest, and Lisbet told me not to overexcite you."
"You look as if you need some rest, too, Kinshirou," said the king.

Lisbet smiled. "I could brew a sleeping potion?" she suggested.

Exchanging a glance with Atsushi, Kinshirou shook his head. "No thank you," he said. "I think we'll all sleep much better now this is over."

With knowledge of what had happened to Argent, he had a firm belief that magic and sleep did not mix.

The day stretched on, and it did not take long for Ibushi's hope to be dashed.

They passed through the farmland and into the next town, where the streets were filled with people who had simply fallen into slumber where they stood.

Ibushi slowed the horse, and they picked their way carefully through the slumbering crowds. Traders slumped over their market stalls, snoring over sacks of grain and boxes of produce. Children curled up in doorways, toys abandoned and playmates forgotten. Villagers lay in the street everywhere they looked, eyes closed and chests rising and falling gently as they slept on.

Ibushi shuddered, finding little consolation in the fact they were all still breathing.

"I don't understand it," he said hoarsely. "Why are they still asleep? Is the curse not broken?"

Seated behind him, Akoya gazed out across the sea of sleeping faces. "I don't know," he said, mind filled with questions. "Why did one person wake when the others sleep on?"

"I thought we'd done it," Ibushi bowed his head, having no heart for seeing the sleeping faces of his subjects. "Though I don't know how we could have. We didn't do anything."

"Maybe we broke the curse when we stopped the blizzard," Akoya said, doubting it but desperate to find some kind of explanation. "Maybe it takes time for everybody to wake up. If they wake naturally, we might have disturbed the farmer when we passed by."

"Maybe..." Ibushi took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "Let's get to the palace and see how things are there. If it's the same as this..." he grimaced, and said no more.

They passed through the rest of the town in silence, and when they reached the open road, Ibushi spurred the horse on faster.

Clinging on behind, Akoya watched the scenery pass by, catching blurred glimpses of fields of cattle and green fields and the occasional sleeping dragon. He didn't understand this any more than Ibushi did, and hoped that in reaching the palace they would find an answer.

They reached another town, and then another, never stopping to explore and only slowing to avoid trampling on any of the sleepers.

Ibushi's body was tense and he stared dead ahead, his hands tight upon the reins. He couldn't bear to look at the scene about them, still in shock at finding the dead dragon. His heart trembled in his chest, all feelings muted except an intense desperation to reach home.

But the palace was still far away, and the horse was beginning to tire, its pace slowing.

"Ibushi, we need to rest." Akoya spoke firmly, having gained no response from him the last time he
suggested they stop.

"Not yet." Ibushi frowned into the distance. The sky was getting dark already, but he was sure another town lay just over the hill. He nudged the horse with his heels, and let out a growl of irritation when the horse didn't speed up. "Hurry!" he muttered at it.

"Ibushi..."

"I said not yet! It's still light! We'll stop when it's dark."

"The horse is exhausted."

"We can go a little further."

"We can't."

Ibushi looked over his shoulder, glaring at him. "Are you trying to stop me from saving my kingdom now?!"

"Of course not!" Akoya scowled. "But if we don't stop, this horse is going to die from exhaustion!"

Faltering, Ibushi faced the front again and tugged on the reins to draw the horse to a halt. "I don't want any more death," he said quietly.

"Nor do I." Akoya dismounted and held out a hand, a tiny pout on his lips. "I'm tired," he said. "Let's rest and make an early start tomorrow."

It was only then that Ibushi realised how tired he was, too. No matter how sorely he wanted to push on, his head felt heavy, and his heart felt heavier still. He would have tried to carry on his journey despite it, but couldn't bring himself to force Akoya or the horse to keep going when both were so worn out.

He took Akoya's hand, and kissed the back of it before slipping to the ground.

"Alright," he said. "We'll rest. But we leave at first light."

They found a stable along the road, empty of life but with stalls filled with hay. It felt wrong to trespass on a stranger's property, but as the horse began to munch from the hay net in one of the stalls, they sank down in the next, grateful of a sheltered place to rest.

Without another word passing between them, they slept, the hay soft beneath their weary, aching bodies and their blankets warm against the cold air.

Chapter End Notes

See, Atchan is fine ♥
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Returning from Perla, Yumoto and En show what they gained there, and Yumoto reveals something surprising. Meanwhile in Argent, Akoya and Ibushi have a curse to break— but neither know where to start.

After a fitful night's sleep, Kinshirou woke to find the bed beside him empty. He sat up with a jolt, eyes wide.

"Atchan?"

"In here."

There came a creak of a chair from the next room, and Kinshirou jumped out of bed to find him. Atsushi was still in his pyjamas, but had donned slippers and pulled on his dressing gown, and he sat at the desk with his diary open in front of him.

Kinshirou padded over, glancing at the diary with some guilt. It hadn't been his business to write in it. The diary was for Atsushi's private thoughts, not his own. Husband or not, they were both entitled to their own privacy.

Yet Atsushi didn't look angry, and held out an arm to him when he approached. Kinshirou accepted his embrace willingly, and held him tight.

"You should be resting," he said. "Lisbet was very firm about that."

Atsushi pressed his face against Kinshirou's stomach, inhaling his sleepy scent. "She's talking with mother right now, and said it's fine if I'm up, so long as I don't overtax myself. Besides, I only have one dose of the potion left."

"Still, I'd rather you were resting..."

"Only if you rest with me. You've been carrying too much weight on your shoulders, Kinchan."

Atsushi pulled back and rested a hand on his diary. "You mustn't blame yourself for what happened," he said.

"If I'd been with you, I wouldn't have let you eat that cake. It was my fault."

"It wasn't. If not for you, I would have died."

Tears sprang up in Kinshirou's eyes. "I thought I was going to lose you..."

Brow creasing, Atsushi pushed himself to his feet and threw his arms around him. "I know," he murmured, closing his eyes. He leaned against him, grateful that Kinshirou was strong and could support him in his weakened state. "I saw what you wrote. It isn't your fault, Kinchan. You saved my life. Remember that."

"I should have considered magic sooner," Kinshirou confessed. "If I'd thought to ask Lisbet right
away, you would have been saved faster."

"Everything worked out fine, didn't it? Except for Noriko..." Atsushi took a shaky breath. "It hurts so much that she did that. I'm her brother, but she--"

He was interrupted by the door bursting open, and two figures running in.

"Kinchan! We have the spells and-- Uwaah! Enchan, look!" Yumoto skidded to a halt before the couple, causing En to nearly collide with him. "You're alive, Atchan!" Yumoto beamed.

En stared, brow creasing. "You're alive... Thank god, Atchan..."

He stepped forward and held out his arms, lower lip trembling. Seeing the emotion in his face, Kinshirou relinquished Atsushi to his embrace, and looked on as En clung to him tightly.

"I thought we were going to be too late," En mumbled into Atsushi's shoulder.

Atsushi smiled and patted his back. "Thank you for trying so hard for me," he said. "I've learned all about your race to Perla."

Kinshirou had put that in the diary along with everything else. It had only been a few days ago, and he hadn't expected them back so soon. He hadn't expected them to back in time. The route from Epinard to Perla and back took much longer than the time they'd been gone.

"How did you get here so fast?" he asked Yumoto, who was standing there beaming and hugging a large book to his chest.

"I made up a spell to make the boat go faster," Yumoto said, as if it was the simplest thing in the world. "Look, I made up a spell to find this too. It's got lots of magic in it. And medicine, see?" He opened the book and held it out at a page marked by a scrap of parchment.

Kinshirou scanned over the faded ink and raised his brows. The potion described on the page sounded almost the same as the one Lisbet had made.

"You worked hard," he said. "Thank you for doing your best for Atchan. I'm sorry it was all for nothing."

Yumoto shook his head, beaming. "What's important is that Atchan is safe! And this book is Gora's, so King Gero said I could keep it." His eyes widened. "I didn't know magic was so easy!"

"Isn't easy," En mumbled, still clinging to Atsushi. He yawned, attention drifting sleepily to Kinshirou. "Yumoto's good at magic."

"Enchan did magic too!" Yumoto rocked on his heels in excitement, beaming. "He levitated himself and took a nap! You're super good at magic, Enchan!"

"Too much effort. Too much concentrating and rhyming and stuff," En finally disengaged from Atsushi and looked at him hopefully. "Can I take a nap?"

"Go ahead," Atsushi said, sinking back into the chair at the desk. Kinshirou rested a hand on his shoulder. "You should rest too, Atchan."

"Not yet," Atsushi shook his head. "I want to hear about Yumoto's magic finds."

As En slouched off to the chaise beneath the window, Yumoto showed Atsushi his book. "Gora
wrote all these spells. And look, there's a message in the front, to me!"

Sure enough, the first page bore an inscription, dedicating the book to 'Yumoto Hakone, Duke of Scarlet'.

"He knew the book would come into your possession," Kinshirou said, full of wonder at Gora's abilities, and a tad regretful they were never able to meet.

"Mm!" Yumoto nodded energetically. "I guess it's 'cos we're family. I dreamt that I'd have a book from my ancestor one day, but I didn't know it was this one! Now I can do magic just like him."

Atsushi smiled. "Would you do some magic for my parents? They're starting to believe in it, and in Argent too. It appeared in some documents..."

"I can do magic for aunty and uncle?! Great!" Yumoto grinned. "I knew this would happen. And I knew that you'd be sick, but you'd get better."

With a growl of anger, Kinshirou grabbed Yumoto by the collar of his shirt. "If you knew, why did you not warn us?!" he demanded. "We could have stopped it from happening!"

"Kinchan, Yumoto wouldn't do us harm. Let him go..."

"No, Atchan, I want an answer!"

Yumoto blinked at him, not at all taken aback. "I knew it would be okay, and it would lead to all this," he said. "I dreamt it, like I dreamt everything else. You know, those dreams where you know they're not just dreams, but you're seeing the future?"

Kinshirou let go of his shirt and took a step back. "No," he said. "I don't have those dreams. Nobody has dreams like that."

"At least, very few people do," Atsushi chipped in kindly. "Special people do."

"Oh, I thought it was normal. I dream of nearly everything like that!" Yumoto laughed. "I wonder what else I'll dream about?"

Atsushi leaned forward. "Have you had any dreams about Akoya?" he asked, a sudden tight sense of urgency in his chest. "And Ibushi, and the dragon?"

Yumoto looked thoughtful, then shook his head. "Not lately. But they went away, and I had a dream that Agneya came back to Perla without them."

Kinshirou took a sharp breath, worry settling into his heart. Akoya's quest with Ibushi had sounded dangerous from the start, and a steed returning home without its riders only ever meant one thing.

"No..." he uttered, heart sinking. "That can't be right!"

"But it's definitely right, because I dreamt it."

"It can't be!" Kinshirou insisted. Barely noticing the tight way in which Atsushi held his hand, or the frightened look in his eyes, Kinshirou began to interrogate Yumoto about his dreams. There had to be something, a clue that would reveal their friends were safe.

But Yumoto had no more to tell, and nothing he recalled of his prophetic dream could ease their minds.
Ibushi had woken before dawn. With no light to see by, he'd lain in the hay, listening to Akoya's soft
breath and the quiet snore of the horse in the next stall. The sound should have been calming, but
thoughts of home continued to plague him, and concerns of what they might find there made his
stomach clench in anxiety.

He'd roused Akoya the moment dawn broke, impatient to get moving. They had tacked up the horse
by the light of the rising sun, and set off without breakfasting--their supplies had run out yesterday.

The sun was high in the sky now, and the horse galloped at a rapid pace, its hooves breaking a
hundred year silence as they clattered against the stones.

Hanging on around Ibushi's waist, Akoya's stomach growled. They'd taken a few rest stops in order
for the horse to drink some water, and had sipped at the cool rivers themselves, but there had been no
food in sight. The stops had only been brief, too.

But the lack of food couldn't be helped.

It seemed Ibushi's silence couldn't be helped either. He'd barely said a thing since dawn, and Akoya
wanted to be mad about it, but he couldn't. He understood his silence. Argent's sleeping streets were
eerie and disturbing from his outsider's point of view. To Ibushi, who knew these streets, the sights
had to be horrifying.

Akoya took a deep breath. His skin tingled warmly with the magic of this kingdom, but his body felt
cold and tense, as though his insides were being strung out and stretched and held in place, a little too
tightly for comfort. He circled his arms more firmly around Ibushi's waist and closed his eyes to the
slumbering scenes they passed, silently seeking distraction.

But distraction wouldn't come. All veins of thought led to Ibushi, to Argent, to the curse. Yet no
matter how much he thought about it, he still couldn't work out how to break it.

'To break the curse of an eternal sleep...' The line from Gora's scroll floated through his mind, so
crucial to their cause, yet never to be finished.

Akoya frowned to himself. There had to be a way. If there was nothing, Gora would never have
appeared to them. They just needed to work out the other half of that line.

Ibushi tried his hardest not to look when they finally passed through the city gates. The strangers of
the villages had been hard enough to witness, but Ibushi had grown up in this city, and knew a lot of
the people in it. These people were his teachers and his playmates, his mentors, associates and
friends. Even the strangers had familiar faces - people he might have passed when out in the
marketplace, or who he had seen within the palace halls.

Then there was his family, in the palace on the hill.

A tug on the reins drew the horse to a stop, and Ibushi gazed up at the palace, something squeezing
at his heart when he saw the faded, raggedy remains of Argent's flag, still flying from the tallest
tower.

"Is that home?" Akoya's voice was barely above a whisper, breath warm against his ear.

"Yes..." It was the first Ibushi had spoken in hours, and his voice trembled with tension. "We're
almost there."

He turned the horse toward the main thoroughfare leading to the palace, but they had scarce gone a hundred paces when the animal let out a frightened whinny and backed up.

"Forward!" Ibushi commanded, nudging its flanks.

But the horse refused to budge.

Ibushi sighed. "We'll have to walk the rest of the way."

His heart filled with dread. It would be impossible not to look into the faces of the slumbering people as they walked. At least on the horse, they had been high enough that he could look ahead and pretend not to see them.

The moment they climbed from the horse, it backtracked further, finding interest in a cart of apples that stood abandoned at the edge of the road. The sight of the horse eating reminded Ibushi how long it had been since they ate. He felt weak from hunger, but couldn't bear the thought of eating, not when he was so close to home.

Yet it felt impossible to take the first step forward. Fear filled his heart at the thought of what might await them behind the doors. After so long asleep, would those he loved most ever awaken? He needed to find them, had to check they still breathed. Only then could he focus on the curse, and breaking it. For if all his loved ones were gone, perhaps it was better to let Argent slumber on forever.

A hand slipped into his, fingertips chilly from the cold air. The touch caused Ibushi to draw a breath, and he stood tall, straightening his shoulders.

"Let's go then," he said quietly. Closing his hand around Akoya's, he led the way up the hill. His pace was tentative at first, and careful as he stepped around the people strewn across the street. Then he saw a familiar face, and then another, and he broke into a jog, and then a run.

Akoya let out a shout of alarm as Ibushi started to run, leaping over sleeping figures in order to keep up with him. Magic crackled across his skin, and he looked about in alarm, almost falling over a slumbering cat. But there was nothing to see beyond more sleeping faces. There were no more threats—or so he hoped.

Breathing heavily, they reached the palace gates. They were half open, and the time-worn hinges let out an ear-splitting screech when Ibushi pushed through them. He could see the guards at the doors now, slumped at their posts with their eyes closed. He knew these guards well, had played with them as a child, gone to his lessons with them, trained with them.

He crept closer, and confirmed that they were still breathing, still alive. It gave him no relief, but alive was better than dead, even if they were trapped in eternal slumber.

Now he just had the rest of the palace to worry about.

Heart in his mouth, he pushed open the palace doors and stepped inside, Akoya tiptoeing in softly behind him.

"Hello?" Ibushi's voice echoed eerily through the empty entrance hall.

The hall was filled with silence, broken only by their footsteps. With trembling hands, Ibushi opened the door to the nearest room, looking in to see the doorman and the porter slumped across the table,
an open bottle of wine between them. He stood in the doorway and stared, wondering what they might have been talking of, why they might have been celebrating when the curse fell upon them.

The sound of Akoya setting his pack on the ground jarred him from his stupor, and he stared as if noticing him for the first time.

Akoya took a step forward, cheeks pale and eyes filled with concern. "Let's keep going," he said softly.

His words were enough to spur Ibushi into action, for all at once he was running for the stairs.

"Wait for me!" Akoya called after him. "Where are you going?!"

Ibushi hadn't time to reply. He took the stairs two at a time, up to the next floor. His heart thumped hard in his ribcage, and his chest felt tight, as though he couldn't breathe. Reaching the top of the staircase, he raced down the hall, to the tall double doors that led to the audience chamber. They groaned as he pushed them open, the sound setting his teeth on edge.

The air that emanated from the room felt stale, stagnant.

Ibushi drew his shoulders higher and walked inside, coming to an abrupt halt the moment he saw them.

Within the tomblike stillness, his parents sat slumped upon their thrones of office. Their faces were contorted into expressions of horror, their mouths open in eternal, silent screams.

Ibushi fell to his knees, a despairing sob wrenching forth from his throat. All around him lay aides and courtiers, their expressions much the same as those of his parents. It was as if some terrible thing had happened here, right at the moment the curse had been placed.

It was too silent, too still. Everything felt dead and departed.

The curse had won.

There was no use in seeking a solution.

"Ibushi..." Akoya's heart broke for him. Seeing him like this hurt so much it was as though it were his own closest kin slumbering on the thrones, rather than strangers. He knelt down in front of Ibushi and reached for him, not knowing what to say.

The moment Ibushi felt his touch, he grasped hold of him and pulled him close against his chest. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and his body shook with the force of his sobs. After so long, after all they had been through, Argent still slept on. There was no answer, magical or otherwise, and he was so tired of telling himself there was hope.

There was no hope.

Of course there wasn't.

Akoya held Ibushi tightly as he cried, and fought against the sting of tears himself. He couldn't bear to see Ibushi this way, and hated that he was so unhappy. He had to break the curse, somehow. Fear of failure had lingered in his mind since the start, but in reality it was unacceptable. It was terrifying. He couldn't fail. This wasn't about representing Perla, nor about improving his reputation, not at all. This was about Ibushi. It was about winning back what had been stolen from him, giving him back the life that he loved.
It didn't matter if everyone at the court of Perla scorned him and laughed at him. It only mattered that Ibushi would find cause to smile again.

And for that, he had to somehow break the curse.

Tears spilling over onto his cheeks, Akoya rubbed Ibushi's back. "I know it hurts, but I'm here," he murmured. He still didn't know what to say, but he wanted to say something. So he spoke from the heart, squeezing him closer. "Though it's hard to see them there, this isn't the end."

"H-how..." Ibushi's shoulders shook as he forced out a reply. "How can you say that? They're...they're..." He swallowed hard and let out another sob.

Akoya shook his head. "They're dreaming, and we'll awaken them. We're in this together. We can't give up now. We're so close."

"If...if you think that..."

"I know it."

Ibushi sat on the floor and heaved a deep sigh. His chest felt leaden, his body drained of energy, and nearly all hope had fled him. But the tiniest spark remained, reignited by Akoya's certainty.

"Really?"

Akoya sank down beside him, uncaring of the dusty floor. "I'll do all I can," he said, taking his hand. "I'll give all I have."

"You're all I have..." Ibushi bowed his head, adjusting his grip to lace their fingers together.

"We have each other." Akoya took a slightly shaky breath. "We've been through so much. It's been so hard..."

"We have, and it has..." Ibushi lifted his head to look at him, brow creasing when he saw the tears in his gaze.

Akoya smiled, blinking them back. "Please don't give up now," he begged. "I need you to be strong, Ibushi."

Bringing a hand to his face, Ibushi gently wiped away a tear that threatened to fall. "I can only do this because you're with me," he confessed, fingers trailing over his cheek.

"I'm here. I'm not leaving."

Ibushi's breath caught in the back of his throat.

"...I love you."

He whispered it as if the words were sacred, and his heart swelled at the way Akoya's gaze softened.

"I love you too," Akoya replied, voice as quiet as Ibushi's. "I'm here for you."

Ibushi leaned in, tear-sore eyes sliding closed. Then their lips met, and the storm in his heart calmed, and the ache eased, and the knot in his stomach loosened with the encircling of their arms around each other. His thoughts slowed, fears drowned in the taste of Akoya's lips, worries lost to the warmth of his kiss, until all that remained was Akoya, and himself, and the firm, steady beating of his heart. Filled with certainty, Ibushi gave himself over to the kiss, letting all else be forgotten in the
wake of a deep, much-needed sense of peace.

That peace was destroyed a moment later, when a cacophony of screams echoed through the room.

They jerked apart in shock, staring at each other as the screams turned to gasps and murmurs of confusion. At once the room was filled with activity, as people scrambled to their feet and edged forward. From outside came shouts, the sound of perplexed cries and running footsteps, of dogs barking and dragons grumbling.

As bewildered as everybody else, Ibushi and Akoya looked at each other, both almost too frightened to believe this was happening.

The curse was broken?

Then a voice rang out, clear and strong despite its hundred years of silence, causing fresh tears to rise in Ibushi’s eyes as the curious words were put forth.

"Ibushi? What has happened? Why are you on the floor, and who is this at your side?"

"Mother!" Ibushi leapt to his feet, pulling Akoya with him. He turned to his parents, who stood before their thrones with a look of bewilderment. "Mother, Father, allow me to introduce--"

"King Gero?" Ibushi’s father peered closer.

Shaking his head, Akoya dropped onto one knee, in an awkward imitation of the way Ibushi had bowed before. "Not a king, your majesty. That would be my father."

"His great-grandfather, actually," Ibushi supplied. "This is Prince Akoya Gero of Perla. My..." He smiled, tugging him to stand. "My beloved consort, and saviour of Argent."

Akoya turned red at the description. "Ibushi, that's too much!" he whispered. "I did nothing!"

At that moment a group of guards rushed in, gazes fearful and weapons at the ready. But they stopped when they saw who was there, and looked to the monarchs, confused.

"Your majesties, we saw the witch Beppu and the demon Andromeda enter this chamber!" exclaimed the guard at the front.

The queen shook her head. "They disappeared," she said. "And my son and his consort have appeared in their place." She gazed at the pair as she spoke, as if finding it hard to believe they were there.

"Beppu and Andromeda are long gone," Ibushi said. He tightened his grip on Akoya’s hand and glanced at him, finding reassurance in his gaze. "A hundred years have passed since they stood here."

Frowning, the king sat down on his throne. "So their curse was true," he uttered. "Yet it must have been broken... Stand down, guards, and be at ease. It appears your prince has a story to tell."

"Ibushi, Prince Gero, come and sit," said the queen. She signalled to the footman, who sleepily brought forth chairs for them. "We must all hear of the circumstances that have led to this moment. I'd certainly like to know why I awoke to find you in each other's arms, as if in the privacy of your own chamber."

Her tone was amused, and caused a blush to rise in the faces of the princes.
Looking at Ibushi in embarrassment, Akoya's eyes grew wide as he realised the answer to the queen's enquiry. It seemed the truth had dawned on Ibushi too, for his brows rose and he laughed softly.

Akoya smiled, finding the sound joyful. All this time, and the answer had been so simple it was almost offensive.

And now it was over. He could relax.

Suddenly overcome by the stress and exhaustion of the weeks and months that had passed, he slumped forward, collapsing into Ibushi's arms.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The curse on Argent has been broken, causing a chain reaction of events all over the world. Discoveries are made in Epinard that will take some time to become accustomed to, and Atsushi and Kinshirou do their best to show fearlessness in the face of them. Still in Argent, Akoya contemplates what he's to do now--and wonders why Ibushi doesn't seem happy.

Chapter Notes

Final chapter!
I decided against an epilogue, as this is pretty much the whole of the tale I wanted to tell for this fic. ^^; Any more might have made the ending seem rushed, or dragged it on for another few chapters. And this is enough.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The palace at Argent was no longer eerie and silent. Reawakened, it was filled with the hubbub of activity. Voices rang out in the halls as people went about their business, and they laughed and sang and reminisced the times of old. The tale of their prince's adventures with his consort had spread fast throughout the kingdom, and as Ibushi made his way to Akoya's room he was stopped several times to confirm that the stories were true.

When he finally reached the door, he knocked and waited for the maid to answer.

He hoped that Akoya was awake. A little over a day had passed since their arrival, and he'd barely seen him.

Akoya's collapse had been alarming. For the briefest, most terrifying of moments, Ibushi believed he'd somehow succumbed to the sleeping curse. But then he'd realised how long it had been since they'd last eaten, and how far and how hard their journey had been.

And he realised that he felt weak and exhausted, too.

Fortunately Akoya hadn't been unconscious for very long, as his eyes has fluttered open again within a few moments of Ibushi lowering him to the floor. When he realised what had happened, he'd blushed prettily, and Ibushi's heart had lurched at the sight of him--and cried out at the thought that their adventures were over.

The king had then called for food to be brought, and Ibushi and Akoya had both eaten ravenously, sparing no thought to the fact that it was a century old, and only edible through magic.

Finally, a maid had shown Akoya to one of the guest rooms, freshly made up for his use, and that had been the last time Ibushi saw him.
Akoya had slept for an entire day after that.

Ibushi had slept for a long time, too, though not nearly as long as Akoya. He'd awoken with a mild apprehension that it had all been a dream, and his kingdom still slept.

But this was real, and as he heard footsteps approach the door, Ibushi smiled and smoothed down his clothes.

It wasn't the maid who answered his knock, but Akoya himself, washed and dressed with his hair hanging loose around his shoulders.

"Ibushi," he smiled. "It's nice to see you. Come in."

"It's nice to see you too..." Ibushi smiled back as he went inside, taking in Akoya's appearance. His clothes had been carefully washed and pressed in the palace laundry, and he looked as splendid as ever. "You look good today," he told him. "How did you sleep?"

"I feel as though I've slept for a hundred years," Akoya smiled, straightening his shirt with a little self-consciousness. It didn't feel right to wear travelling clothes in a palace, but it was all he had. "And these are just my travelling clothes, but thank you."

Ibushi tilted his head, smile becoming playful. "Perhaps I ought to commission an entire new wardrobe for you, in the style of Argent," he teased. "Including undergarments."

A blush rose on Akoya's cheeks and he laughed. "I have my own undergarments, thank you," he said. "A-and the clothes I have will suffice."

"I see..." Ibushi's good humour faded, but he hid it behind a smile, stifling the thought that this meant Akoya didn't plan to stay. Stepping in close, he caught a strand of silky pink hair between his fingers. "It's been a while since you've worn it loose," he said, voice soft.

"It was more practical to braid it for our journey," Akoya replied. He lowered his gaze, stomach tensing at the unexpected sadness in Ibushi's eyes. He didn't understand it. Ibushi had regained family and his kingdom, and everyone clearly loved and respected him. So why wasn't he happy?

Ibushi circled his arms around him, taken by surprise at his discomfort. It had been some time since Akoya had shown uncertainty. It was about his appearance, he supposed.

"I like your hair like this," he said.

Akoya gave him a look of confusion. "I thought you liked it braided?" he asked. Had he been braiding his hair all this time, when Ibushi actually preferred it loose?

Ibushi smiled. "I like it braided, too."

"Well, which is better?!!"

"I like both."

"But one of them must look better than the other."

Ibushi arched a brow at him. "You look beautiful no matter what you do with your hair. The best style is whichever you like best."

Akoya paused for a moment, thoughtful. He'd never considered it that way, and really didn't know why he was fixating so much on his hair when Ibushi was right there in front of him, and there were
no more dangers to their lives or threats to their peace. They could finally spend time together unhindered, and he was worrying about his hair?! How unimportant!

He sighed, feeling stupid but reaching a decision nonetheless.

"Loose, then," he smiled.

"Loose it is," Ibushi smiled back, and drew him into a warm kiss that was only interrupted when a maid entered the room with their breakfast.

Later that morning they roamed the palace, hand in hand. Ibushi showed him the stables and introduced him to the dragon masters. He led him through the gardens, and pointed out the places that would bloom with bright flowers come the spring, secretly hopeful that it would encourage him to stay. He showed him the long gallery, in which hung portraits of every monarch of Argent since the kingdom's founding. A portrait of his parents took pride of place above the imposing fireplace, and their mouths seemed to smile as they passed. A trick of the light, some might have thought, but the tingling of Akoya's skin suggested otherwise.

After that, they wandered through the armoury, the great hall, the library--and the kitchen, where Ibushi confessed to have stolen many a treat as a child.

Finally he showed him to a quiet little drawing room, high in one of the towers.

"It was here," he said, motioning to an empty space on the wall. "The mirror."

"This is where it all began..." Akoya looked at the space in quiet wonder. There was damage to the plaster there, as if the mirror had been taken down in a hurry. A little over a hundred years ago, Ibushi had stood in this very spot, and spoken magic words that trapped him within the mirror, tricked into it by the cunning demon and vengeful witch.

"And now it's all over." Stepping up behind him, Ibushi slid his arms around Akoya's waist and hooked his chin over his shoulder. Akoya leaned back against him, eyes closing and a faint smile playing across his lips as he remembered their reflections embracing this way in the mirror, before Ibushi's freedom. He imagined a mirror before them now, plain and harmless, reflecting their images, their closeness.

All curses had been broken.

Ibushi had his family, and his kingdom...

There was nothing more he needed.

A pang in his chest at what that might mean, Akoya tried to ignore the thought, and tried to think of other things. He smiled, and turned around in Ibushi's embrace. "I wonder why Gora never told us the curse could be broken by something so simple?"

Ibushi leaned in and nipped softly at his lips. "He gave us the answer," he reminded him, recalling the scroll. "He just didn't know it was damaged."

"He should have simply told us the answer." Akoya ran his fingers through Ibushi's hair, fondness warming his chest. "Awakening a kingdom with a kiss. It's like something out of a fairytale."

"A fairytale..." Ibushi's brows rose. "That's exactly it!" Heart thudding, he pulled him towards the
"Come on!"

"Where are we going now?" Akoya asked, as they hurried through the palace.

"The nursery. I want to check something." Ibushi led him further, down two flights of stairs and along a corridor. Then he threw open a door and went inside, bypassing dusty old toys to reach a shelf of books.

Akoya looked on as he flicked through one of the volumes, curious about what had triggered this search.

"I knew it was familiar!" Ibushi held out the book, hands trembling in excitement. "This is one of my childhood books. Read this!"

Taking hold of it, Akoya skimmed over the open pages, eyes drawn to a little verse halfway through.

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To free a soul trapped in a mirror's form
Speak spells from a heart with affection warm
To break through a border cursed to be gone
Bring forth a heart of that which was there born
To break the curse of an eternal sleep
To heart bring a kiss of true love deep
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"This is from Gora's scroll!" he exclaimed.

"Yes!" Ibushi beamed. "All fairytales contain a little truth. This one sort of predicted the future."

"Maybe Gora wrote this, too." Akoya was joking, but it seemed strange that the very advice they'd needed was here in a book from Ibushi's childhood.

Ibushi chuckled. "It wasn't Gora, but certainly the author could see into the future."

"I wish I'd found a copy of this in Perla," Akoya said, looking at the title on the cover.

'The Sleeping Princess, and Other Stories'. He knew the tale, even if he hadn't heard this version of it: a princess cursed with eternal sleep, woken only by the kiss of a prince who had fallen in love the moment he saw her.

"There really is a little truth in all fairytales," he mused.

"Maybe one day our story will be in a fairytale too," Ibushi said. "Two princes who awoke an entire kingdom with a single kiss."

At that moment, Akoya realised how blind they had been to the answer all along.

"The truth had been staring us in the face from the start," he said. "We awoke more than Argent. Even back in Perla..."
Ibushi's brows rose. Of course, it was obvious. A kiss born of true love: such a simple magic, yet some of the strongest in the world.

It was why Agneya had awoken.

It was why the dormant Creeping Evergreen had sprung to life (they had definitely shared a few kisses beneath that).

"I still don't understand why the farmer and his horse awoke first," he said, frowning at the pages of the book. "If all it took to break the curse was to kiss you, why didn't the rest of the kingdom awake with them?"

Akoya read the verse again. "It doesn't make sense."

"'To break the curse of eternal sleep, to heart bring a kiss of true love deep'..." Ibushi tapped his finger on the page, thoughtful. "To heart... 'Heart' is used differently to the previous couplet."

"Then it means something else?"

"Heart... To heart..." Ibushi took a breath, comprehending. "My parents said we appeared where Beppu and Andromeda had stood. To heart. It doesn't mean our hearts, it means heart as in the centre. That's why the kingdom didn't awake at first. We weren't standing in the place where the curse was set."

"In which case we were lucky..." Akoya shut the book and handed it back. "We might never have known."

Ibushi set the book aside and drew him close. "I think Gora knew we would succeed. He knew we'd fall in love, and share a kiss in the right place."

Colour rose in Akoya's cheeks, and he nodded. This was why Gora had never stepped in to stop the curse himself. He'd seen into the future, seen how events would unfold, seen that they would meet, and how their affections would grow.

This wasn't like the story in the book, where the prince kissed the princess with whom he became enamoured on sight. It was about two princes who had grown to love each other, deeply enough that a single kiss could break a centuries-old curse.

"A kiss of true love deep," Akoya quoted. His eyes met with Ibushi's and a thrill coursed through his chest, warm and exciting. "...It is, isn't it?" he asked softly.

Ibushi answered him with a kiss. "It is," he confirmed in a whisper. "True love, and a happy ending."

Akoya would have argued that he had too many concerns in Perla for it to be a happy ending, and that Ibushi didn't look entirely happy as he said it, but it would have ruined the moment. It was far more pleasant to forget about his worries and move closer, to claim another kiss, and enjoy the heat of Ibushi's body against his own.

When the people of Epinard came to look back upon the events of that autumn, they would come to say the entire thing felt like a dream. But whilst they lived through it, the autumn was strange, confusing, and full of revelation.
Further records of Argent appeared over the course of one night. Maps redrew themselves to chart the location of the kingdom, and historical records suddenly grew entire chapters devoted to the kingdom's past.

But the written records weren't the only thing to resurface among the people.

Stories were remembered, tales handed down through generations, of adventures had by great-grandfathers and distant aunts who had explored Argent and ridden dragons, and had affairs and fights and all the other things people did.

At first there was hysteria. People thought the Dove Sickness was spreading, that the kingdom was doomed. But then the king sent forth his proclamation, deeming the tales of Argent true, and revealing a new discovery made by his forces: pathways into the mountains, where there had been none before.

A team of explorers was dispatched, and Epinard waited impatiently to hear of their findings.

Atsushi and Kinshirou had wanted to join the team. But Atsushi was still recovering his strength, and Kinshirou wouldn't leave without him, so they sent a letter with the explorers, in the event that Akoya and Ibushi were found there, and waited anxiously to learn if the message reached its recipients.

Atsushi was feeling much stronger today. He'd risen with Kinshirou, and together they went into the town to oversee Yumoto's display of magic.

The people crowded around, excited to see something new and unknown, and cheered in delight when they saw conjured apparitions of green dragons and pink wombats.

Yumoto was having fun with his magic. After making the apparitions dance around each other, he made himself levitate above the audience. Then he asked for volunteers, and levitated them as well.

By the time his display reached its end, he was tired but happy, and the crowd dispersed, torn between amazement and cynicism.

Overhearing some of the more sceptical comments, Kinshirou rolled his eyes. He didn't expect people to believe in magic immediately, but to decry something even after experiencing it firsthand was purely ignorant.

"Atchan!" Yumoto bounded up to where they sat, and threw his arms around him. "You came to see!"

Atsushi smiled and ruffled his hair. "I couldn't have missed it."

"You impressed a lot of people today," Kinshirou said. "Well done."

"Really?!" Yumoto's eyes grew wide. "But it was easy magic!"

"Easy for you, perhaps."

"Not everyone has your skill, remember," Atsushi got to his feet. "Let's go back to the palace. It's cold out today."

"Are you alright, Atchan?" Kinshirou stood and offered his arm. "Shall I call for the carriage?"

"No, let's walk. Are you coming, Enchan?"
Stirring from where he'd been resting, En stretched. "I'm coming. Good time for some tea, isn't it?"

"Exactly what I thought." Slipping his arm through Kinshirou's, Atsushi led the way back to the palace.

They chatted amongst themselves as they went, broaching more delicate subjects once they were settled in the privacy of the apartment.

"Have you had any more dreams, Yumoto?"

"Yeah! We all went to Gaia!"

Kinshirou snorted. "I think that one is easy to assume."

"Well, Akoya and Ibushi were there too?" Yumoto added, smiling.

Atsushi sat forward. "You mean they're alright?"

"I dunno about now 'cos I haven't dreamt it, but they will be."

"Just tell us the whole dream, Yumoto..." En yawned and slouched lower in his chair.

Yumoto shook his head. "I don't think it's good to tell people all about the future, 'cos they might try too hard to change it."

"Isn't that the point of knowing the future?" Kinshirou inquired. "So that you can change what's unfavourable?"

"No. It's just so you can prepare. Gora wrote in his book that he saw the future, and prepared as best he could for it, but knew he was only playing his part in the destiny that fate had planned. You can't change the future, only make the best of it!"

Kinshirou raised a brow. The speech was surprising, coming from a person who wasn't exactly renowned for intelligence.

He'd underestimated Yumoto a lot more than he'd originally thought.

"So everything we've tried to do was going to happen anyway..." Atsushi curled his hand around Kinshirou's, fingers brushing over his wedding ring. It was nice to think their marriage had been preordained, despite the uncertainties they had faced before then.

Looking back over the past year, it felt like his arranged marriage to Akoya had been the catalyst for such a huge chain of events. Without the planning of his father and King Gero, he would never have gone into the market in search of an engagement gift for a man who was, according to rumour, extremely concerned with his image. He would never have bought the mirror, which in his opinion had been a little ostentatious, and would never have heard the merchant's ridiculous story about it. A story that turned out to be more or less true. If not for all that, Akoya would never have met, and freed, Ibushi.

And Kinshirou would not be at his side right now, squeezing his hand gently and watching him with deep, unshakable love in his eyes.

Smiling, Atsushi squeezed back. They had been through so many difficult trials, yet here they were, safe and well and happy.

No matter what fate had in store for their future, their love would prevail. Fate had brought them to
this moment, and fate was on their side.

Five days passed in Argent, and the kingdom was starting to recover from its century of sleep. A quarter of the kingdom's dragons had been lost to the curse, and many riders along with them, and the king and queen had been busy sending their condolences to widows and owners alike.

It was shortly before noon when a group of riders approached the capital. Word spread immediately, and the group were watched with suspicion as they proceeded towards the palace. After the curse, the people of Argent were cautious of outsiders, and these people were dressed strangely.

It didn't take long before they were spotted by the palace lookouts, and all rushed to the battlements to watch the group approach.

Akoya's heart sank when he saw them, for he recognised the livery long before the riders were close enough for the crest on their cloaks to be read.

When they neared the castle, the king motioned for his people to be at ease.

"That's the Gero coat of arms!" he exclaimed. He called down to the guards at the palace doors. "Bring them into the palace, and find stabling for their horses! These travellers are from Perla, and they will be tired after their journey."

At once the king had departed the battlements, making his way inside so he could greet their guests.

Akoya watched the riders dismount, and gave a start when one of them looked up, directly at him. He ducked out of view, panic rising and stomach knotting with nerves. His father had always sent riders out to bring him home. He prayed this wasn't the case this time.

Seeing the stress in his face, Ibushi took a step towards him, but the queen got there first.

"Akoya, you must be happy to see your subjects after all this time." She smiled, slipping her hand through his arm. "Come, let us welcome them together. Ibushi, come along now."

She held out her free hand, and Ibushi let her take his arm, filled with the sense that Akoya was no more eager to meet the riders than he was.

Once they had been welcomed into the palace and shown to lodgings, the riders from Perla - guards, all of them - were seated at the king's table for lunch. As the meal progressed, they told of their journey to Argent, and their reasons for setting out.

"So when the dragon returned without their highnesses, and with a young dragon at her side, their majesties were deeply concerned, and sent us out to find their highnesses," the chief guard explained. Ibushi took a sharp breath at this, and looked at Akoya in excitement. "Agneya's egg!" he whispered. "I wonder how she named it..."

Akoya nodded. "I wonder what it is," he said. "Another female, perhaps? I hope they're doing well."

Overhearing, the queen addressed the chief guard. "And how is Agneya and her young hatchling?"

"I couldn't say, your majesty," the man lowered his gaze. "Truth is, none in Perla know about dragons, besides what Prince Ibushi taught us. The dragon has taken her baby back to the cellars
beneath the palace."

"That won't do at all," sighed the queen. "We'll send out two dragon riders immediately, to provide advice."

Ibushi cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should give King Gero time to prepare for their arrival?" he suggested, looking to Akoya for confirmation. "Dragons are a rare sight, outside of Argent."

"The rest of the world doesn't believe in them," Akoya nodded. "Most of my people have yet to see a dragon."

"Then we ought to go on ahead, your highness," said the chief guard. "Their majesties are eager to see you."

Averting his eyes, Akoya took a deep breath. "I'm afraid my father will have to wait a while longer," he said. "For my business here is not yet finished."

The chief guard looked as though he was about to argue, but then the king spoke up.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you wish, of course, Prince Akoya."

"Thank you, your majesty," Akoya smiled at the king, privately furious with his father. It had always been the same: he left the palace, and his father sent guards to fetch him back again, as if he was a helpless child.

Beside him, Ibushi let out a quiet sigh. The fact the guards had been sent to retrieve Akoya couldn't be more obvious. King Gero had strange ways, and wished to control too much--his son included.

"Well then," said the king, shooting a look at Ibushi that suggested they would be talking about this later. "Perhaps our guests could tell us more about their journey here?"

With the subject neatly changed, lunch continued in a light-hearted manner, though Akoya couldn't shake the feeling that the guards wouldn't leave unless he was among them.

It was as they were finishing lunch that one of the lookouts raced into the room.

"Your majesty!" she said, too excited to keep her voice hushed. "More riders, this time from the east. They're from Epinard!"

The king jumped to his feet. "Then we shall welcome them, too. The more guests the merrier!"

"This is certainly an eventful week," the queen mused, rising elegantly. "Let us all watch their arrival."

As everyone filed towards the doors, one of Perla's guards caught up with Akoya.

"Your highness," he whispered. "His majesty asked me to place this directly into your hands."

Before Akoya could respond, he'd pushed a letter into his hands and disappeared into the crowd. Akoya stared after him, and a moment later Ibushi caught hold of his arm and tugged him in the opposite direction.

"Come on," he murmured. "We can watch more privately from my room."

As Ibushi led him away, Akoya tucked the letter into his pocket. He'd read it later, when alone. Any communication from his father was bound to ruin his mood.
From Ibushi's room, they watched in silence as Epinard's riders approached. The horses of Epinard were sturdy and walked with a particular heaviness, Akoya thought. In contrast, Perla's horses were far more elegant. However, it appeared that the leader of Epinard's party had a better sense of etiquette than Perla's chief guard, for when the group reached the courtyard and dismounted, they immediately removed their hats and bowed low to the king, and did not rise until he bade them to.

"I wonder what led them to come here," Akoya murmured, unable to tear his eyes from the scene. The manners of Epinard's party put Perla's to shame.

"Perhaps Kinshirou and Atsushi sent them?" Ibushi suggested.

"But that's the personal crest of Epinard's king. Atsushi's father sent them."

Down in the courtyard, the king was leading the travellers towards the palace. Akoya turned away with a soft huff and leaned against the window sill. "Why did they have to come? Why did any of them have to come? It was so peaceful until today."

"So that's what's on your mind." Leaning beside him, Ibushi entwined their fingers. "You looked miserable at lunch..."

"It's because my father is still trying to control my life, even at this great distance." Sighing, Akoya looked down at their hands. The letter in his pocket seemed to prickle him through his clothes, and he dreaded what it would say. "Still," he said, tone softening. "This is Argent, and in Argent I am at the service of your father, not mine."

"He won't make you leave, if you don't want to..." there was hope in Ibushi's voice, and his grip tightened almost imperceptibly. "You have choice here. You have freedom."

Akoya tilted his head, gaze searching Ibushi's and finding tenderness, and concern.

"Ibushi," he said quietly. "I want--"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door, and a voice called from outside. "Your highness? Are you available?"

With a scowl, Ibushi looked to the door. "You may enter," he replied, voice stern.

A servant peeked inside, tense expression easing into one of relief when he saw them. "Please forgive the intrusion, your highnesses," he said, bowing. "But the party from Epinard have sent a message for your highnesses, from their highnesses."

"Is that it?" Ibushi stepped forward and motioned to the folded and sealed sheet of parchment in the man's hands.

"Yes, your highness," the man passed it over.

"Thank you, you may go."

Ibushi waited for the door to close behind him before he turned to Akoya and handed the letter over.

"You should open it," he said, perching on the edge of the bed. "They have been your friends for longer, and they wrote your name first."

Akoya looked dubiously at it. 'To their highnesses Prince Akoya Gero of Perla and Prince Ibushi Arima of Argent' it said.
"We should read it together," he decided, sitting beside him and ripping through the seal. It had been too long since he'd heard from Atsushi and Kinshirou, and he was eager to see what they'd written.

The letter had been written by Atsushi, and Akoya didn't miss the slight wobbliness of his handwriting, as if he'd been writing it on the move.

'We're entrusting this to the exploration team my father is sending out, in the hope that they'll reach Argent and find you both safe and well. There are some within Epinard who still disbelieve in Argent, magic and dragons, but with the events that have passed here since our wedding day, more are coming to believe. Soon, we hope all will be an undeniable truth, like the rising of the sun and the moon.

So much has happened here that it would be impossible to put into one brief letter. I'm sure my people will be able to fill you in on all that has happened, but please know that we are both well. I hope our paths will cross again soon, so you can hear the whole truth, rather than the exaggerated second-hand stories.

But mostly, Kinshirou and I hope you are both safe, happy and healthy.

If this reaches you, please respond as soon as possible, and put our minds at ease.

With love,

Atsushi & Kinshirou'

"Well," said Ibushi, as Akoya refolded the letter. "That's..."

"Worrying," Akoya frowned and got to his feet. "I need to talk to the people who brought this. It sounds like Kinshirou and Atsushi are going through difficult times."

Ibushi raised his brows and smiled faintly. "If that's so, then we ought to go to their aid," he murmured. He may have only just returned to Argent, but another adventure sounded wonderful, if only to keep Akoya by his side a little longer.

Akoya looked back at him and smiled. "Then let's find out what's going on."

They left the room, eager to find a new cause. But when they discovered what had happened in Epinard, it seemed the cause had escaped them, and Akoya couldn't write back fast enough.

'I'm so glad you're both safe. You've been through so much! I wish I could have been there to support you. If only we'd known of the "plague" in Epinard, we could have sent you home with magic books from the start! Perla certainly has enough of them.

Ibushi and I have also had a number of trials, but I shan't write of them here. There's just too much to talk about, and it's better to tell you in person. Besides, Ibushi and I are rather tired of retelling it, for everyone here wants to know.

Argent is a beautiful place. The people are friendly, and protocol is much less strict than in Perla. The fashions could do with some updating, but I can forgive them for being a hundred years behind
the times. My modern clothing has sparked some interest within the palace, and I feel the fashions here may undergo a rapid change!

I want to see you both. You may say that you're well, Atsushi, but I won't believe it until I see you. Let Kinshirou take care of you. I hope that we'll be able to visit soon, though you'll understand that Ibushi wants to spend time with his family (he sends his greetings, by the way).

Nevertheless, we're both fine and have recovered from our adventures, even if we are tired of talking about them.

Take care of yourselves,

Akoya

P.S. Forgive the method of delivery for this message. Ibushi and I discussed it, and decided that whilst it might cause some surprise and alarm, the presence of a dragon in Epinard would, at least, provide undeniable proof of their existence.'

Kinshirou refolded the letter and looked out at the dragon in the courtyard.

"Surprise and alarm? More like terror and panic," he muttered. When the dragon appeared from the west, its impossibly huge form soaring rapidly across the rooftops, the people of Epinard had fallen into panic. Guards had fired weapons at it, but they had appeared to bounce off before they hit (magic, Kinshirou later discovered).

The dragon passed on to the city without being stopped, and Kinshirou and Atsushi had heard the panic before they saw its cause.

Upon seeing the dragon, Kinshirou had raced outside to tell the guards to stand down and clear the courtyard for its landing. Atsushi, who had recovered most of his strength since the poisoning, hurried to this father to inform him of the arrival.

It had caused an unreasonable amount of panic, and Kinshirou was half inclined to write a letter back immediately, to berate his friend for causing so much trouble.

"They shouldn't have sent this by dragon," he grumbled. "We could have waited the few days needed for it to be delivered the traditional way."

"Dragon messengers probably are the traditional way in Argent," Atsushi joined him at the window. "I'm just happy to hear they're safe. Anyway, look," he pointed beyond the palace gates. "The people are lining up to see the dragon. Father's announcement about it must have reached everybody by now."

Kinshirou raised a brow at the long line that snaked its way down the hill. "It looks like everybody came."

Smiling, Atsushi slipped his hand into Kinshirou's. "We ought to be there when the gates are opened. We should show that we're unafraid, so they know the dragon is safe."

Kinshirou sighed and pressed a kiss to Atsushi's temple. "You should stay inside. Your strength still hasn't returned."

"I'm strong enough to greet a dragon for my people, Kinchan."
"You still tire easily."

"If I'm tired, I'll take a nap this afternoon. I want to do this. Epinard needs to see that dragons are real, and that we're unafraid of them."

It was evident that he wasn't to be dissuaded. Tilting his head, Kinshirou kissed him softly.

"Alright," he said. "But take your cane, and lean on me if you feel weary."

Atsushi rested his head against Kinshirou's. "I don't need my cane, only you."

"Atchan..." As he held him close, Kinshirou wondered how long he'd been so weak to Atsushi's will.

By the time they arrived at the courtyard, En and Yumoto were there, along with the king and queen. Yumoto was, of course, sitting in the dragon's saddle, running his hands over warm, inky blue scales and making exclamations of delight. The king and queen were talking to the dragon's rider, who had bowed low to them upon their arrival, and En was apparently talking to the dragon, for he leaned against one of its front legs, and made a lazy response whenever the creature let out a grumble.

Raising a brow, Atsushi approached. "I didn't know you could talk to dragons, Enchan..."

En shrugged. "I dunno dragon language or anything. This guy's rumblings make sense in my head, that's all."

"You ought to learn the language," Kinshirou remarked. "It will be useful in future."

"I guess..." En yawned, then nodded when the dragon rumbled again. "Might be easy."

Atsushi was about to ask what the dragon said, but his mother called out to them.

"We must begin. Our guests must depart for Perla before nightfall."

With the exception of Yumoto, who remained in the saddle, the group stood in a line before the dragon. Then, with a signal from the king, the guards opened the gates and the townspeople were ushered through to cast their eyes upon the majestic creature.

"My dear people," said the king, holding out his arms. "I beg your forgiveness for the fear caused by our splendid new guests. Allow me to introduce Gibrill, dragon rider of Argent, and his dragon companion Gerra of Argent."

As the people stared and murmured nervously amongst themselves, the queen held up a hand. "Be at ease," she said. "Gerra has assured us that his rider Gibrill is perfectly harmless."

The people laughed at that, and the atmosphere in the courtyard eased a little. From the saddle, Yumoto waved.

"This is really great!" he shouted. "Dragons are the best magic!"

"Lisbet would argue that point," Kinshirou murmured. When Atsushi raised a brow at him, he smiled, blush creeping into his cheeks. "Love, Atchan," he whispered. "That's the best, and strongest magic. Uh... according to Lisbet, that is."

Atsushi smiled, linking arms with him. "Not according to you?" he teased.
"Well, it feels improper to say it in public."

"I think it's right, about love..."

As Kinshirou turned a deeper shade of red, En yawned and sauntered back to Gerra. He patted him on the nose, and the dragon immediately lay down and closed his eyes.

The crowd gasped in amazement.

"Perhaps Gibrill can explain a little to us about dragons?" the king prompted, clapping the dragon rider on the shoulder.

The man bowed and stepped forward. "Dragons are large and fearsome in appearance," he began. "But they're not dissimilar to horses and dogs..."

As his explanation continued, Kinshirou shook off his embarrassment and tugged Atsushi towards the dragon. It was important that the kingdom's royalty showed their fearlessness in the face of the dragon. If a king or a queen or a prince showed they were unafraid, they proved that there was nothing to fear.

They made a show of rubbing Gerra's nose and flanks, and when the queen joined them, the crowd appeared to let out a sigh of relief.

A little later, when those who felt brave enough were permitted to approach and touch the dragon under the watchful eye of his rider, Atsushi overheard some of their comments.

"It's not hot, just warm! I thought it would be scalding..."

"Wow, these scales are so smooth!"

"He's beautiful."

"I want to be a dragon rider too!"

"His majesty said they're leaving soon, I hope they come back."

"In all my years I never believed these fairytales could be true, but here I am, ninety-three years old and meeting a real live dragon! Well I never!"

"It exists. It really exists..."

An unacknowledged tension eased in Atsushi's chest when he heard the comments.

Of course there would still be those who denied magic, just as there were still people who supported his sister's ideals. It would take a lot of time for their people to become accustomed to things like magic and dragons when the world's science had supposedly proven them nonexistent.

But it would only be so long before they couldn't be denied anymore. The evidence was too solid. After all, what was more solid than a huge, living, breathing dragon, sitting in the palace courtyard?

There would be more dragons in Epinard in future, he was sure of it.

Catching Kinshirou's gaze, Atsushi smiled, warmth spreading through him.

So much was changing, and so much still had yet to change. These times would be written into the history books as a period of enlightenment and wonder.
Life was an adventure, and he was happy to be living it with Kinshirou at his side.

The great hall of Argent's palace was full of music and voices, for tonight was a night of celebration. The scent of delicious food hung in the air, and the room was illuminated by both magic and candles, the latter bringing warmth and the former making the light seem alive.

Tomorrow, the explorers from Epinard would make their journey homeward, as would the last contingent of guards from Perla. The first Perlan group had departed the morning after their arrival, in order to alert the king to the impending visit of dragons and their riders. The rest had remained, in order to escort their prince home.

Tonight's festivities were to celebrate the new bonds formed between the kingdoms, and to bid the travellers a safe and easy journey.

The best food was on the tables, and the court's finest musicians whipped the guests up into a frenzy of dancing, their music fast-paced and exciting, and their songs hearty. Laughter rang out within the walls of the palace, lively and happy.

Akoya couldn't stand it.

He sat alone on the battlements, so lost in thought he barely noticed how cold the wind was against his skin.

Perla's guards had come to bring him home. When they arrived, he'd hoped it wasn't true, but after half returned and the others remained, he discovered that they intended to stay until he was ready to return.

That had been seven days ago, and yesterday the chief guard had informed him that he would be travelling home with them by the end of the week. The guard's attitude had angered him, for he spoke to him like a child, rather than an adult--and a prince, at that.

Akoya had raged at the man, and refused to leave until he was ready. But the guard simply replied that they would all stay on in Argent until that time, and Akoya realised his battle was already lost. With these guards around, it had been impossible to have a moment's peace. It had been impossible to have time alone with Ibushi, too, and that made him more furious than anything else.

It was like being in Perla all over again.

Shouts rang out from within the palace, interrupting his train of thought. He glanced behind, hoping that nobody was going to come out here and disturb him. A couple raced past the doors onto the battlements, their figures disappearing from view quickly, even though their loud, laughing voices continued to echo through the corridor.

Turning away, Akoya looked out over the night-time cityscape and huddled up further beneath the lantern. The streets below were brightly lit, and people wandered back and forth as easily as if it were day. Ibushi had shown him around the city, led him to his favourite places, introduced him to different people who lived and worked there. The people had treated him with courtesy and warmth, and he hated that he would be taken away from this.

Akoya reached into his pocket and withdrew the letter from his father. The folds in the page were worn, and no matter how many times he reread it, the content did not change.
Son,

Your mother and I were quite concerned when Agneya returned without you, and we were most surprised to discover she had brought with her a young dragon. We had feared the worst, but after the sudden reappearance of Argent upon the maps, I assume your quest has been a success. Therefore I have sent out our best guards to find you, and to ensure you have a peaceful passage home.

You will have realised by now that I will not accept your abdication. You are Perla's only heir, and with the news from Gaia of Ryuu's engagement to Io, you will understand that a future united kingdom of Perla and Vesta under Ryuu's rule is now out of the question.

The time for strangeness and adventures has passed, and it is imperative that you return home.

We are proud of your achievements and anticipate your arrival.

Your father

The King of Perla'

Akoya crumpled the letter in his fist, and fought against the urge to cry. Tears would mean he was defeated. He was defeated, but tears would be a weakness. He had to put on a brave face and be strong, for in Perla he would face worse than creeping evergreens and deadly blizzards.

In Perla, he faced a lifetime of being unable to pass along the corridor without people nudging each other and making unkind comments.

He faced a lifetime of never knowing if those who surrounded him were his friends, or if they simply wanted to climb further up the social ladder for their own benefit.

He faced a lifetime of receiving no respect from anyone, whether they were a humble peasant or a high-born noble.

Akoya knew he wasn't liked in Perla. His parents tolerated him, the nobles didn't care for him, and his people did not know him for who he was, only the rumours spread by the nobles. Perhaps even his staff did not like him-- with the exception of Zundar, maybe, who had proven himself one of the few members of the palace he could trust.

He had to admit, he missed Zundar. Not to mention Dadacha's macarons. And he missed the other Macaron, his beautiful, loyal mare. He dearly wanted to see Agneya again too, and to meet her offspring.

But none of that was enough to make him want to return to Perla. It wasn't home. It was a prison, and his right to the throne was a life sentence.

All that awaited him in Perla was scorn and disapproval, and he didn't want to go.

Yet there was nothing for him here in Argent, either. Though Argent's people were welcoming, and the king had invited him to stay indefinitely, he had no place here. He barely even felt he had a place at Ibushi's side anymore, for Perla's visiting guards seemed determined to interrupt their liaisons, and Ibushi was spending more and more time in the company of his parents, rather than with him.

Akoya tried to be understanding about it. Ibushi had been separated from his parents for over a
hundred years, and had been so devastated when he thought he’d lost them forever. King and Queen Arima were pleasant, good-humoured people. They doted on their son, and treated all who stepped through their doors with graciousness and respect—a far cry from Akoya's own parents.

Akoya was glad for them. But he was jealous, too. They had each other, and he had nothing. After all he’d gone through to help Ibushi, here he was alone once more, cursed to return to Perla and one day sit upon an unwanted throne.

When tomorrow came, all that waited in his future was a lifetime of emptiness.

But he had to return. He had a place in Perla, even if he didn't want it, and one day Perla would need him, even if it didn't want him.

Heart heavy, Akoya refolded the letter and returned it to its place. He should have known his father would make this demand. He'd only been able to leave because his quest would become famous should he succeed, and raise up Perla's reputation.

The curse had turned out easier to break than expected, and now he’d achieved his goal, there was nothing more to do.

As he contemplated his fate, Akoya wondered if this was how Atsushi felt upon his arrival in Perla: an outsider in a strange land, where everything was just slightly different to all he knew. Like he shouldn’t be there. That no matter how welcomed he was, there was no reason for his presence, no place for him. No purpose.

Akoya sighed.

He needed a purpose, and he wouldn't find it here.

He wasn't sure that he'd find it in Perla, either.

All this time, all this struggle, and nothing would change. He'd go back to Perla, he'd lose Ibushi, and things would be just as they were before his eighteenth birthday.

The thought made him feel empty, and he squeezed his eyes shut tightly against the prickle of tears.

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere."

Ibushi's voice floated to him on the breeze, and he couldn't fight the tears back anymore.

"Ibushi..." Akoya swallowed hard and stepped out from beneath the lantern, walking instead to the edge of the battlements where his tears would be swallowed up by the darkness.

A pair of arms encircled him, and a chin rested on his shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Akoya cleared his throat, too tense to lean into Ibushi's warmth. "Nothing," he said again.

Ibushi kissed his cheek, and squeezed him tighter when he felt tears against his lips.

"It must be something for you to be crying in the dark on your own."

Akoya sighed, head bowed. "I'm going back to Perla tomorrow."
"I wish you would stay."

"I have no choice! My father wants me to return. I'll be king one day..."

Ibushi winced at the tremor in his voice. "I'll be king one day, too. Yet I'm still able to do as I please until that time."

"Your parents are far better people than mine." Akoya gulped. "Besides, there's nothing for me here."

His words made Ibushi tense. He lifted his hands to Akoya's shoulders, gently turning him around and looking into his eyes. "Not even me?" he asked, voice tentative.

Akoya's heart clenched uncomfortably when he saw the pain in Ibushi's gaze. He turned his head, fresh tears trickling down his cheeks.

"Of course there's you," he said quietly. "But you're happy now. You were separated from your parents for so long, and you need to spend time with them."

"That doesn't mean I don't want you!" Ibushi gripped his shoulders tighter. "I'm happy because I was reunited with my family. But I'm happy because you're here, too."

"Ibushi..." Akoya frowned. "There's no place for me here. Even if I were to ignore my father's wishes, I can't exist here with no purpose."

Ibushi's expression softened. "To tell the truth, I've been thinking about that too," he admitted. "I just haven't been able to talk with you about it. We're always interrupted."

"It's a speciality of Perla's guards," Akoya muttered ruefully.

"So I noticed. But we can send them on their way, if you want."

"The only way they're leaving is if I leave with them."

"No. This is my father's kingdom, and his word is law. If he demands they leave, they must. Not that I want it to come to that..." Ibushi sighed. "Akoya... Argent is freshly awoken in a world that has moved on without it. This kingdom knows little of the outside world and its advances, or of modern ways. I've been talking with my parents about this, and they agree that Argent needs a special advisor on these matters."

"Oh. Well, Gaia is known for its great economical minds, Aurum's diplomats have always been very--"

"You, Akoya. Who better to advise Argent than the consort of their very own prince? You know the ways of the world, but you also know of magic. You are the link between the two. Between Argent and the world. Argent needs you."

Akoya gulped. The offer was tempting, it really was. But his father's orders still stood, and he was expected in Perla. Besides, he'd never been given that level of responsibility. Nobody had ever believed him capable of doing anything beyond showing up and smiling and waving before he passed along his way amidst a crowd of guards. The thought of handling such an important job was scary.

"I don't know," he said quietly. "Anyone from outside Argent would make a good advisor. A far better one than me, at that."
"It can only be you. You're the only one qualified for it," Ibushi insisted.

Akoya cringed. "But I--"

Ibushi cut him off with a kiss, needy and breathless and hard, his fingers tangling into his hair. He pulled back with tears in his eyes, and fixed him with an imploring stare.

"Argent needs you," he repeated softly. "I need you. I'm asking you to stay with me, Akoya."

Akoya bowed his head, breath hitching and tears rolling down his cheeks. After all this, he'd never realised how much he'd needed to hear that. His chest filled with warmth, and when he met Ibushi's eyes this time, he smiled.

Ibushi smiled back, wrapping his arms around him once again. "Will you stay?" he asked softly.

"Ibushi..." Closing the space between them, Akoya drew him into a kiss, heart thumping with certainty. Then he smiled, and whispered his reply into Ibushi's ear.

"I never once wished to leave you."

"Then you'll stay?"

Ibushi looked at him hopefully, and when Akoya nodded an affirmative, his face filled with so much joy that Akoya thought he might burst from happiness, just from seeing it.

"This is wonderful!" Ibushi exclaimed. He took his hand and tugged him towards the door. "We have to tell my parents--" Stopping in his tracks, he turned back to him and gave a conspiratorial grin. "Or we could do that later. We're alone. Everyone is at the party. Nobody would notice if we slipped off somewhere..."

"Then let's go," Akoya beamed at him, and as he let Ibushi lead him into a cozy, secluded room far away from the celebrations, his heart fluttered madly for what lay ahead of them.

He had a place. He had a purpose.

He had Ibushi, too, and as soft kisses grew heavy and hungry and gave way to sighs, and as magic crackled between them, he knew that every moment up until now had been worth it--and every moment from now on would be worth it too.

Although their journey was at an end, this was just the beginning of another chapter.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to the people who read, left kudos, and commented on this fic! Whether you keymashed or wrote several paragraphs, I really appreciated it (and enjoyed seeing your reactions!) It was really motivating, especially at a time when I considered discontinuing this fic.

Originally this was meant to be a short sequel to *Love is Glimpsed in a Magic Mirror*, so I could write Kinshirou and Atsushi's wedding. I soon decided that King Gero wouldn't make life easy for any of the princes, so it got longer...
Then I decided to continue beyond my originally planned end of KinAtsu's marriage and Akorima's departure, and so it got longer still ^^; (The entirety of this from that point onward was going to be a separate fic in itself...)

I'm sorry that IoRyuu still weren't in this so much. I really love them, but their story wasn't as entangled with the others so felt a little redundant. Needless to say their return to Gaia was much more peaceful and uncomplicated than KinAtsu's return to Epinard. ^^;

Thanks again to everyone who read this. I hope you had fun reading it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!