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**IKIGAI**

by Macbetha

**Summary**

The supernatural now coexists with society; humans take violent measures to control mystics and the eternal feud between vampires and werewolves comes to a head when the undead prince locks eyes with the local alpha. The uncontrollable force of Rin Matsuoka meets the immovable wall that is Sousuke Yamazaki as the world slowly realizes that the price of war might have been too high.

**Notes**

happy halloween month ; )

**a few notes:**
- the trailer for ikigai is [here](#).
- if you've read my stuff before, you know that music is a massive inspiration for my work, and i think it's a very immersive attribute to reading as well. so, whenever there's a particular shift in mood or a new scene that was inspired by a song, i've linked that song in the first letter of that paragraph so you can listen while you read, if you'd like.
- mystics: an umbrella term for all supernatural creatures.
- rin's father is alive as the vampire king in this story.

thank you and i hope you enjoy my ikigai~
On a rainy Monday at midnight, two figures sit on a coffee shop balcony.

A gloom preys upon the city, a ghost of consequence that traps all homes in foreboding darkness. Fingers of lightning rewrite the language of terror, resurrecting each monster under the bed as the protagonist of this brave new world; they run rampant in the shadows, thriving in their nefarious ambitions. They hold their chins high as images of complete social disintegration, relishing as vessels of grandeur and obscurity.

The storm washes color away, leaving behind the murky stench of garbage and the flesh of war – body parts cast into storm drains and shoved into dumpsters, nameless faces of the old and young. They are bodies of humanity as well as those of the supernatural, all of which who slaughtered blindly, though their blood moves the same.

A rose petal tumbles in the wind and a hand darts out faster than eyes can follow. The figure pinches it between two fingers with painted black nails, his rings stacked up to the knuckles – none of his jewelry is plated in tungsten, much less iron; even gold warms his fingers to a dangerous burn. Steel is the only metal that graces his chains, one of which proudly displays a tiger’s head with pearls for eyes.

Rin rubs the rose petal between his forefinger and thumb, his eyes half-lidded with laziness as he gives an unimpressed sweep at the aesthetic limits of the modern architecture around them. His companion is still as death, though his blue-fire eyes dart to every billowing canopy and tumbling newspaper on the road.

Rin’s nostrils flare to take in the humid aroma of the city. He tastes smoke on his tongue, not the fire of man or even of this world. Fires of the devil always have a certain perfume to them, an
alluring hint of sweetness stolen from the forbidden fruit itself.

Rin and his comrade regard the club across the street. The neon sign burns like hot coals even in the rain; the cursive scrawl is misleadingly coy with its playful, swooping lines that read The Ninth Circle.

Rin rolls his eyes to his friend who drips rain like a forgotten graveyard statue, his head bowed just the same. “Ready, Haru?”

Haru nods and Rin rolls his tongue over his fangs with a smirk. They launch themselves over the balcony and Rin’s dead heart shoots up his throat. Jumping – or falling, rather – is a philosophical experience for him. Rin remembers his humanity in moments like these, but only with the invigorating realization that no fall can ever break him.

He hits the ground like an explosion, boots slamming down with enough force to cave in the pavement. Haru lands in a graceful crouch, cold and calculated as ever. They stalk toward the club, two tall silhouettes that exude a taunting amount of confidence, and their bodies do not bow to the weather as Rin knocks on the door.

The tiny window slides open and a face scrutinizes them with a long once-over. The demon’s eyes have no iris, no white to them – they glitter in their blackness before flaring wide with a curse like talking backwards.

Rin leans in, pressing himself against the door with the closeness of a lover. The demon cranes back before his expression hardens. “Password?”

Oh, Rin could just purr. “My password is that I’ve got an angel at my beck and call and I won’t hesitate to tell him where this cute little titty-bar is.” He makes a face at the burning outdoor sign. “Ain’t the Ninth Level of Hell supposed to be made of ice? You dickbites have no creativity. Way to play into your own stereotype.”

The demon’s brows furrow in rage before someone yanks him back with a hiss. “He’s the vampire prince!”

Rin’s grinning from ear to ear when the door opens. These demons are wearing their human skins tonight, though they’re not very pretty or impressive. Rin smiles with snake-oil charm. “Haven’t you heard that vampires have to be invited in?”
The demons scowl in varying degrees of disgust, but they step aside. “Come in,” one says gruffly, like he’d rather swallow his own tongue than speak such words.

Rin bypasses them without another thought. Haru glares in warning at the pair, his presence firm and protective at Rin’s back.

The bar is long and narrow with walls of embroidered velvet, the tiles black and white at their feet. Chandeliers light a gloomy path through the space, leading past counters of whiskey, blood, cocktails of venom and black potions like tar. The bass purrs like a sex growl, booming through Rin with such intensity that it’s as if he has a heartbeat again.

Glares make ice claw down Rin’s back. Vampires are not welcome in an establishment of demons; vampires are considered a knock-off version of damned when in the presence of hell incarnate. That’s what makes demons so much fun to fuck with, in Rin’s book.

Demons of all kinds lounge on the tufted settees: women in evening gowns with animal skulls for heads; men with their muscled pecs swelling over their unbuttoned shirts as they sip on bourbon with their skeleton fingers. Rin saunters up to an entourage, pinpointing a demon who has a gorgeous tan and fire for hair. He perks up from his slouch when he notices the vampire, thighs spread confidently as Rin steps between them to coo, “Hi, Sei~”

“Well,” Seijuro smirks, his voice always bouncing with some sort of chuckle. “If it ain’t the local undead royal.” His eyes sweep Rin from head to toe. “In all his sublime grandeur. What brings you all the way here, to me? You still nostalgic for the lost era of romance? Wanna fool around and pretend it’s a ritual again?”

“Was I that special to you?” Rin lifts a pierced brow with a mocking grin. “Is your bed so fucking dry that you still remember me after millennia?”

“You’re unforgettable,” Seijuro promises, voice warm with a fondness that could almost be considered kind. Haru rolls his eyes impatiently. “You know it’d break my heart if you were here for business instead of pleasure.”

“Afraid I am,” Rin sighs with a deceiving pout.

“Ah.” Seijuro snaps his fingers to sprout a flame from his thumb and light a cigar. He hisses the smoke out through his teeth, throwing his burly arms over the settee to show off his chest, but Rin’s starting to get impatient with playing into his antics. “What of it then, love? Your daddy too burdened with authority to come say hi?”

Defensiveness bristles through him but Rin’s expression remains composed. He sprawls out on Seijuro’s lounge, ignoring the protesting glares of his entourage as he steals a shot of ogre’s draught from the table. It tastes earthy, like wheat and rain. Seijuro lets Rin cuddle right up to him like the fool he is, and Rin’s voice lowers in a coy murmur. “Rumor has it that you had another visitor here today.”

Seijuro’s features harden, barking, “Rumor?” He blinks in realization and fumes. “Isuzu.”

“Mm, not the point. Who came here?”

Seijuro curls an indulgent smirk, scratching at one of his stubby horns and not saying a damn word.
Haru grits his jaw, gloved fingers twitching toward the blade in his pocket.

Rin gives his own smile as he throws one leg over the other; the muscled meat of his thigh curves into the new position and Seijuro’s gaze tracks the motion with hunger. Under his stare, Rin rolls his ankle just so, and silver flashes from the tongue of his boot. Seijuro’s a fool that thinks with his cock but he’s just smart enough to know that Rin’s blade is soaked in holy water. The demon pouts, looking heartbroken. “Is that really necessary?”

“No,” Rin simpers. “Not if you tell me what I need to know.”

Seijuro’s gaze flickers to Haru, who arches a daring brow. The demon rolls his gaze back to Rin with an endearing smile. “I can appreciate someone brave enough to play dirty.” Rin doesn’t move as Seijuro sweeps the back of his hand across the vampire’s cheek. “But you’re out of your league, little bat. I’d fly away if I were you.” He looms closer, bringing his scent of ash and apples with him, and he brushes a whisper against Rin’s ear. “Fuck. You.”

Quicker than the next breath, Rin slams his forearm across Seijuro’s throat like a cinderblock. Rin straddles him and the other demons surge into action, one of them built like a mountain and clenching his hand into a fist of screaming flames. With one flick of his wrist, Haru shoots a dagger through the demon’s wrist to pin it against the table. The demon breathes fire, roaring, “You filthy fucking –”

“Shut up, Hoshikawa,” Seijuro sighs, looking utterly bored from where Rin’s got him pinned. “That ‘filthy fucking’ leech is older than God Himself. Have some respect.”

Haru’s nostrils flare on an infuriated breath until Rin gives him a sharp look to remain calm. Hoshikawa rears up but the entire club freezes to the bone when Haru bears his fangs in a hiss so sharp and loud that Rin’s ears ring.

Seijuro shifts and Rin takes his blade out with a gloved hand. The blessed dagger hisses to life, quivering at the close proximity of a demon. Seijuro’s head snaps away, feet scrambling uselessly under Rin’s weight. Rin looms closer, ducking into Seijuro’s neck with fangs poised to strike. “Did you know that the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear?” He brings his head up slowly as his eyes surge redder. “You’re more human than you first assumed, Sei. I taste your fear.” The demon startles when Rin points the blade at his crotch. “Pray fucking tell, are you more afraid of those who showed up earlier, or are you more afraid of me?”

Seijuro’s skin blazes under Rin’s forearm; catching on fire is one of a demon’s defense mechanisms, but Rin hasn’t even felt warm since he died, so it’s useless against him. Seijuro pulls Rin’s forearm away from his throat just enough to rasp, “Werewolves showed up earlier today.”

Haru snaps, “What’d they want?”

The demon snorts. “Same thing that you want. They asked if we could confirm rumors about the humans uprising.”

“Aw.” Rin purses his lips mockingly. “Did they scare you like we did?”

“Not half as much, dear one,” Seijuro goads.

Haru’s shaking with pent-up aggression, so Rin takes that as a sign to cut to the chase. “Well?”
“Of course it’s true,” the demon scoffs. “You think people would be attacking werewolf pups at daycares if they had any fuckin’ humanity left in them?”

“Interesting of you to say,” Rin muses.

Seijuro is steadfast in his earnestness. “I have no business around innocent souls. Children don’t belong in hell.”

The vampire cranes back at that before refocusing. “Which wolves came to see you?”

“They’re a new pack to the city, just migrated here a few years ago. Their alpha – Sousuke – and his big ass shadow, Makoto –”

Sousuke.

“– there was another wolf, a redhead –”

“Shiina Asahi,” one demoness snarls, her tiny goat-skull head disproportioned with her voluptuous curves. Rin might be a vampire but he never liked hearing skulls talk. “That mutt is mated to a seelie, I could smell it all over him. Such a union is a disgrace to both of their kinds.”

“Satomi was here, too, Sousuke’s sister,” Hoshikawa hisses, his limp hand twitching disturbingly under the knife that pierces it. “Now get this goddamn thing out of me.”

“No,” Haru smiles. It’s terrifying.

Rin saunters backward to the door, spinning his blessed knife between his fingers just to make sure their onlookers don’t fuck with them. “Thanks,” he winks at Seijuro.

The frazzled demon rubs his throat, which is flushed from being so close to a holy object. He calls, “Do you really think that you can stop this uprising when you’re more worried about the werewolves than protecting your own people?” He scoffs a laugh. “You’re just like your father.”

Anger flares through him, eyes narrowing with tunnel vision before Haru wrenches him away by the arm. “Ignore him, let’s go.”

They step out into the rain and someone slams the door behind them. Rin whips around, dagger carving the air in two on its path through the door window. The glass shatters and he hears demons scampering away from the knife with frightened crowing that make his chest swell with pride.

“Do you haven’t Seijuro,” Haru says, fists clenching with bristled shoulders. “It wasn’t necessary, it wasted time, and you’re lucky he didn’t put a curse on you.”

Rin rolls his eyes, cinching his black trench tighter around his waist as the wind picks up. “He’s far too sweet on me to –”

“You could have been hurt.” Haru’s never as expressional as he is when he’s tormented, and Rin hates himself for making his friend wear such a look. Haru’s voice is exhausted from giving this speech year after year, century after century. “Do you ever think about what it would look like if I went home empty-handed, telling your mother and father that something happened to you?”
Rin sobers up, features softening. His voice falls quiet. “I’m sorry, Haru.” He might be Queen Miyako’s guard, but Haru is also Rin’s friend, and that’s never as clear as it is in the heat of battle.

Haru fumes a sigh, raking his drenched hair back as rain pelts their faces. “Whatever, let’s –” He flusters. “Let’s just go.” He shoulders by Rin with a grumble. “You’re never careful, I swear.”

Rin grins and jogs ahead of him, rounding to face Haru as he pulls his shirt collar down to show the crest inked into his chest. He throws out an arm in grand display. “I’m the vampire prince, ain’t I?”

“And an idiot,” Haru snorts, sticking his nose up as he passes Rin, who is frozen in disbelief. Haru tips his head back at him impatiently. “Come on.”

They make their way to one of the only restaurants open at this hour called The Meadow Pig – it has a black star painted above the door. The symbol means that the diner is a safe haven for all mystical species. Very few establishments brandish such a sign; most places have clear indicators that mystics are not welcome or will even be shot on sight.

A little bell rings over the door as they enter the bleak diner. Static-laced noir music slinks from the overhead speakers and Rin makes a face at how stale the air is, thick from the day’s lingering oven smoke. Paper banners hang faded and depleted from the ceiling, their color faded with age. There’s a waiter nodding off at the host stand, so unfortunately, there’s no one around to scare.

Miniature pig trinkets watch Rin and Haru walk down the aisles of tables to a booth with peeling fabric. A boy sitting at the booth has his back to them, facing the wall with his small hands wrapped around a cup of warm milk with honey on the side. His skin is flawless as a marble statue, hands free of blemishes or even palm-lines – no thumb prints.

The boy’s tiny shoulders hunch at sensing their presence and Ai turns with an exhale of relief. “Thank God you’re all right.”

“Of course we are,” Rin scoffs as he and Haru slide into the booth.

They shrug off their drenched coats and Rin ties his wet hair back before Ai tenses in dread. He pulls his white cardigan tighter around his middle to brace himself. “So, is it true?”

“Yeah,” Haru sighs, crossing his arms in irritation. “The humans are planning an uprising.”

“Ai worries his lip. “Maybe the uprising is focusing on the werewolves, then. Wasn’t it their pups that were targeted at that daycare a few weeks ago?”

“Seijuro insinuated that the uprising was bigger than just an attack on the wolves.” Haru glances over the ketchup-sticky menu and Rin rolls his eyes because he always gets the same thing here. “He threatened Rin by saying he wouldn’t be able to protect his own people.”
Ai closes his eyes, crestfallen. His laugh is faint and bitter. “Demons always know when something bad is about to happen; angels know when good things are upon us, but I haven’t sensed any forth-coming joy in so long.” He bows his head at Rin. “I’m sorry I’ve been so useless.”

Rin surges to grab his hand, but his fingers hover over the angel’s arm – religious objects (including religious mystics) cannot harm Rin by presence alone, but he’s superstitious to a fault. That’s why he wore gloves handling the blessed knife and made Haru do the same. Instead of touching him, Rin offers Ai a warm smile. “You’re not useless, Ai. You being able to sense that nothing good is approaching is a tool in itself. Promise.”

Ai beams in a way that tells Rin his words meant the world. Fallen angels are often kidnapped by corrupted religious cults and that was Ai’s unfortunate greeting upon being hurled through space and crash-landing to the earth. Fallen angels, much like vampires, are considered a knock-off version of damned according to demons, therefore vampires have a soft spot for angels and often take them in to protect them. And how could Rin not, when Ai was his guardian angel before he hurled to the earth?

The sleepy waiter shuffles over from the host stand, taking his notepad out with a yawn. He squints at the them, gaze lazing from one glowing boy to the duo with fangs peeking between their lips, and the waiter’s spine snaps straight. Horror flares off him so powerfully that Rin tastes it and the boy’s fingers tremble as he scribbles down their order, but at least he wasn’t rude. Rin gives him props for that.

Haru gets grilled mackerel, which fucking reeks, but he eats it with his eyes closed in nostalgia. Vampires can taste what they’re eating, though they don’t really have a need for food and it isn’t a substitute for blood. Rin thinks mackerel reminds Haru of his human days; he doesn’t understand why any vampire would want to remember such a time, but Haru’s his closest friend, so he doesn’t judge. Rin gets a sundae just to play with the cherry stem with his tongue, and Ai gets another round of milk and honey.

After the meal, they slink out into the abandoned streets, which are foggy from the storm’s humidity, but at least the rain passed.

Rin casts a worried glance at the horizon and the trio proceeds onto the route toward home. Darkness is a natural comfort to vampires, but Rin doesn’t feel comfortable for some reason. He flexes his ears but only hears the distant wail of banshees that drift through grocery store aisles in the night. They pass by an apartment complex and Rin zeroes in on the nearest window – there’s two heartbeats lulled slow in slumber, one of them just a bit faster, which distinguishes that it’s a sleeping woman with a man. He picks up on another muffled pulse and realizes that the woman is pregnant.

Everything is normal. Then why does it feel like –

Haru’s arm flies out to shield Rin and the trio tenses as one. Rin yanks Ai behind him and pulls a fresh blade from his thigh holster, aiming it at the shadows nearby alley way. Haru’s glare pierces the darkness and they wait, suspended in pause, until footsteps come from overhead.

A chuckle has them slowly lifting their heads to the powerlines. A silhouette saunters across the nearest line, their horned wings draping the trio in shadow. “Demon,” Ai whimpers, scampering closer to Rin.
“No shit,” the figure cackles, and Rin deflates as he recognizes the voice.

He sheathes his dagger and crosses his arms, canting his hip. Rin calls, “Have you nothing better to do, Isuzu?”

“Yeah, your sister.” Isuzu hops from the line, wings billowing out in a mighty lurch. Wind blows Rin with each mighty push of her wings and she hovers a few feet above them. Her hair and eyes blaze with hellfire, her teeth a white-hot flash between her grinning lips. “You owe me for telling you about Nii-chan and the uprising. You don’t wanna stay in a demon’s debt too long~”

Rin huffs, blowing his bangs out of his face. “Fine, what do you want?”

Isuzu folds her hands over the straps of her grimy overalls. “Listen, I know your dad’s a tiny bit prejudice against my kind even though I’m a delight, so you distract your parents. I wanna see Gou.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to see you,” Rin suggests, not because it’s true but because he’s lazy about things like this.

Ai’s head peeks over Rin’s shoulder with a frown. “She talks about Isuzu all the time –”

“Ha.” The demoness shoots him with a finger gun. “Knew it.”

Rin groans, dragging a hand down his face. “Fine.” He bristles with a thought. “Wait.” Isuzu pauses in the middle of her victorious fist pump, and Rin levels their gazes. “What do you know about Sousuke?”

“Oh,” Isuzu breathes, perking up and fluttering a bit higher. She tips her head, canting her antlers. “Yeah, his pack is new to this territory but he’s got a vicious reputation.” Her eyes light up with manic glee. “I’ll tell ya even more if you can distract your parents for the whole day.”

“… vampires sleep during the day, Isuzu.” Christ, why is Rin’s sister in love with such a blockhead? Must run in the Mikoshibas.

Isuzu says, “Well, I heard that the uprising is just because Sousuke’s planning on eating all those humans that hurt those pups.”

Rin and Haru share a look and the latter muses, “So it is just about the werewolves.”

Ai quivers between them. “Will he really eat all those people?”

“No Ai, she’s just trying to scare you –”

“Not trying, achieving,” Isuzu winks. Ai cowers. Haru stares down at his own dagger like he’s thinking about ending it all.
Rin calls up to Isuzu, “Find out where this ‘uprising’ is supposed to take place and I’ll help you sneak into the castle for the rest of the week.”

The demoness crows and twirls in victory just as Haru’s head snaps to Rin. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s just to be sure,” the prince says, flittering a hand through his hair.

Haru’s eyes fall flat. “Rin, we can’t risk something like that just because you want a little drama.”

“Ah,” Rin hisses through his fangs with a hand over his heart. “You wound me, Haru.”

“No, I know you.”

Isuzu flaps her wings impatiently. “I don’t care what you do with the information, now let’s go.” She starts toward the castle and the trio follows her from below.

Haru gives Rin another firm look. “We are not interfering with the wolves.”

“You might not.” The prince grins with all his teeth. “But I am.”

Chapter End Notes

special thank you to the wonderful bakapandy for the haru & rin art as well as vamp!rin~! thank you so much! go follow her on tumblr | twitter

extra notes:
- i have an ikigai guide (ikiguide heh) for all the supernatural creatures here.
- ai being addicted to milk and honey: in biblical tales, the promised land is "the land
of milk and honey." get it
- "pups" is just a term for the children of werewolves; they still look like human kids.
- just for funzies, here's some character motifs:
  rin: eternal flame by brand x music
  haru: between worlds by adrian von ziegler
  seijuro: the countess by mac quayle
  ai: dreamcatcher by alexandre desplat
  isuzu: i won't be seeing you tonight by vitamin string quartet

up next: we meet wolfsuke

come say hi on twitter & curious cat
A Wolf's Liberation

Chapter Summary

A howl pierces the air in the distance.

Sousuke’s fur bristles, tail standing alert as his ears perk up. He recognizes that howl – that voice. Kisumi hides a smile at Sousuke’s wagging tail and gestures him away. “Go to them.”

Sousuke takes off like a shot, kicking up dirt and hurdling over fallen trunks. A family of rabbits dives to the side as butterflies and sprites scatter out of his path. He ducks under vines and charges through a stream, startling bite-sized water nymphs who let out disgruntled hisses at his carelessness. Another howl rises and swells with happiness, urging Sousuke to run faster.

Everything primal and sentimental inside of him goes haywire with the joy of coming back home to his den, his pack.

Chapter Notes

a big hug to each and every one of you that let me know what you think of ikigai thus far! you've really made my day a thousand times over, tysm. <3

hope you enjoy wolfsuke. ; )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Liberty for wolves is death to the lambs."

- Isaiah Berlin

Sousuke is incredibly susceptible to the spell that the woodlands casts upon lonely natures. He craves the solitude of the forest with a type of passion that rivals obsession, especially after spending too much time around people – supernatural or otherwise, but particularly demons. After his trip to The Ninth Circle, he requires a few days alone in the wilderness and it undeniably heals him.

It’s one thing to hear tales of the mountains but it's different to experience them; no person can witness such without a shifting of values that become permanent and sacred. The bleak splendor of the woodlands overwhelms him with an epiphany of his own littleness, and the blue mountains rise like the tide to swim in the fog. He understood the wilderness’s silent warning from the beginning of his life as a wolf: the forest is merciless and terrible and taught him like so.

Sousuke ventured far from his pack on this journey, all the way to the fence that stretches across
the tree line as far as the eye can see. He smells burning rubber from the distant overpass, smells warm gasoline in chambers; he can pick apart vehicle models from the volume of their engines alone. Sousuke’s snout twitches at the murky acid of the batteries electrifying the fence and his fur prickles at the buzzing sound.

The woods protect him in a shield of bushes as he gazes down at the fence, which skitters on the edge of wilderness and civilization, acting as a wall between life and death. It is not present to keep mystics caged inside the forest – no man-made wall could barricade the strength that courses through those who call the woodlands home. The fence was designed to keep humans out of the mystics’ territory because the local police know that no creature here can be gunned down or bribed from the safety of their trees. The woodland mystics are not considered sentient and are seen as more animal than human, so the government deemed it safer to just hand over the forest and try to keep humans out. Well, at least that was the statement in the press release – Sousuke hasn’t lived this long by blindly trusting anyone, especially those in politics.

Sousuke is present to keep an eye on the sawmill at the other side of the fence. Old pickups lug by woodchip piles and drivers have their elbows folded over cab windows as they clutch steaming thermoses of coffee in their gloved hands. The mill drapes the mountain in shadow – it’s a hulking structure with dozens of windows that drink in the colors of sunrise.

Sousuke takes note of the curious glances some men sneak at the fence and he doesn’t like it. He knows that the mill workers are underpaid and these men know how much a woodland dragon sells for on the black market, whether that be to a lavish tycoon or a travelling circus that skips town before permits can be checked. Though Sousuke’s pack is his first priority, dragons are the wisest creatures among the mystics; they are old and reverend beings that own these forests as well as their skies. Sousuke won’t tolerate any poachers disrespecting their stature.

With a low growl of irritation, he turns deeper into the forest and gazes upon a world untrotted by the feet of man. The forest stretches its unbroken carpet to the lake shores. His heart sings in the wondrous space, the trees golden with the sunrise’s luxurious warmth. There’s the fragrance of snakeroot as well as bark from swamplands, hardened by the night’s chill. Sprites fly up above, skimming through the technicolor mist of morning, and he is smitten with the sight; the lakes shine like black glass under the fading stars as he inhales, savoring and slow.

The forest listens to Sousuke’s every breath as he makes his way home to the den, leaving pawprints in the frosty murk. He wanders by lakes that gem the woods and he looks to the islands of all describable shapes and sizes – the Seelie Court calls those islands home. The fae are a breed of mystics that reigned supreme in medieval times, but they continue to have extreme influence in the supernatural world due to their political power. Luckily for Sousuke, werewolves don’t have any interest in the royal fae, the monarchy of the vampires, or the religious gradation of angels and demons. Life revolves around the pack and it’s that simple.

Sousuke tenses at the curious odor of something unfamiliar. His instincts assume it’s a deer or some other animal sweating from the exertion of searching for food, but a deeper uneasiness flutters down his spine. Don’t be foolish, the ghost of his father whispers in his head. Don’t ever assume you are smarter than the trees.

Something instinctual tells him to stop walking so he waits, motionless as a hemlock stem. Dread washes through his gut as a shape moves through the trees to clamber into his path. The forest swallows the noise of the beast’s steps, offering no echo or resonance. Sousuke’s claws dig into the ground to stay absolutely still as the mountainous creature hulks through the bushes – even crouched like so, the being is a dozen feet taller than Sousuke. It’s a skeletal varmint that walks on
its knuckles and the purpled tendons of its legs pull taunt with all motions; it brings with it a cloud of rot and soiled guts.

Calmy, Sousuke’s eyes climb the wendigo’s torso, its ribcage merely draped in a translucent sheet of gray skin. Sousuke hears the creature’s heart beating, can see it pulse wetly from where its tucked away in a cage of bone. The wendigo’s unraveled intestines are milky as they sway freely and Sousuke stares at the wendigo’s head – as he presumed, it’s a deer, though no natural deer has teeth too big for its mouth, yellowed with the consistency of bark. The wendigo drips blood and vomit all the way down its open throat, spilling into its ribs.

The wendigo might have a dead bear slung over its back, but Sousuke knows that such creatures are never satisfied and full. Wendigos have no sentient thought and are cursed with the hunger of flesh for eternity; they are souls that were once human before they tricked a fae. Trickling anyone of the Seelie Court is a surefire way to infuriate them beyond comprehension and the fae are remorseless in the pain they give.

The werewolves allow the wendigos to roam the forests since they are particularly good at smelling intruders and their wails alert the wolves of any threats at the fence line, but that does not mean they share that sentiment with Sousuke. He’s warm with living blood and that’s all that matters as the wendigo sniffs and blinks its eyes, which are clouded with blindness and tearing up from the windchill. Sousuke huffs in annoyance because he can’t stand here forever so he might as well get this over with. He drags a paw through the dirt to signal the beast and it launches in his direction with a screech that will silence the birds for hours.

He dives to the side but the wendigo was hungrier than he thought – its claws dig into Sousuke’s back ankle, breaking through his tendons to yank out the ball of his heel. Sousuke’s fur bristles, pain bleeding his vision red as he bears his teeth in a snarl that makes the very earth quiver in fear. Instead of running like the wendigo assumed he would, Sousuke collides with it, squeezing his fangs into the softened rot of its head. The wendigo hollers at a fever pitch that make Sousuke’s ears ache, but he holds on and chews into what he can, closing his throat off from the rancid taste.

Talons rake his underbelly, desperate to claw him open and let his insides flow, but Sousuke wrenches the wendigo away and it rolls down the hill in a violent tumble. He throws all his weight into pouncing on the wendigo’s back, pinning it down to dig his fangs into its neck, and Sousuke crunches into it until his teeth meet bone and the beast’s spine gives a final, echoing crack.

The wendigo falls limp and silent disturbingly fast. Sousuke heaves as he glowers down at the body, which is facedown in the mud and never to resurface. He clambers off the wendigo and shakes his fur off, jaws slinging bloody foam. He feels his stomach sewing itself back up, his heel swelling as the bone grows back, and he wobbles over to the bear to make a stolen meal out of it.

Sousuke’s sister collects skulls, so he takes the wendigo’s head before continuing his journey home, feeling far more invigorated than exhausted. It would be quite embarrassing to stumble upon a dragon when he’s this filthy, but luckily, they’re taking their morning flight – he sees their grand silhouettes carving through the clouds, hears their thrashing wings and smells the brewing smoke in their throats.

The maniacal giggle of changelings haunts the trees but Sousuke does not have a human soul to possess, so they don’t bother him much on his walk. However, the sight of them is all kinds of nauseating – changelings wear the bodies of the human children they’ve stolen from cribs but their skin is awash in leafy green, their eyes black pits, every tooth elongated and diamond-sharp. They stop following him when they realize that Sousuke’s carrying the head of a wendigo; it would take
an entire pack of average werewolves to decapitate one, but because Sousuke has displayed his viciousness as the alpha, the changelings know not to pester him too long.

A family of traveling gnomes offer him a bowl of creek water and they skin the wendigo skull for him while he drinks – at least some woodland creatures are thankful for the protection werewolves grant upon the forests. Though the gnomes could fit in his hand, wear ratty doll clothes and talk in sing-song gibberish, they are quick workers and clap their little porcelain hands with joyous guffaws when Sousuke bows his mighty head in thanks.

He comes across another odd scent as he nears home – it reeks of nightshade, the lovely flowers that are loaded with poison. He can’t stand that dangerous smell being so close to his den when there’s pups waking up to play. But then his logic trickles into his consciousness, distinguishing the aroma as familiar, and he breaks through a clearing as Kisumi looks over his shoulder. He’s crouched with his back to Sousuke when he sings a laugh. “Morning, Sou~”

His snout bunches up at the nickname but he lets it slide because he feels bad about thinking Kisumi’s smell was an enemy’s. As a werewolf, he’s biologically inclined to think that everyone outside of pack is a threat. Old habits die hard, he supposes.

Sousuke rumbles in greeting and ventures over to the seelie. He’s sitting on some furs and Sousuke recognizes them as the pelt of a dire unicorn, the hellish counterpart of a pegasus. Asahi gave that pelt to Kisumi when he first started courting the seelie. Sousuke vehemently disapproved of their union at first and he still isn’t openly supportive of it, but when a wolf claims that they’ve found their mate, they’re a lost cause.

Sousuke had to choose between losing Asahi or accepting Kisumi, and most of his pack still disagrees with his decision to let the seelie know the location of their den. It’s caused such unnecessary tension where there are more severe situations to focus on, but Kisumi is naturally charming as a fae and he’s doing everything right to gain the pack’s acceptance: he defected from the Seelie Court to be with Asahi – well, more like he accepted being exiled by his own kind, but such a display of loyalty is slowly but surely winning Sousuke over. Kisumi taught the pack a spell that will make their clothes appear after shifting so they won’t have to carry a garment sack in their jaws, not to mention it comes in handy having a powerful fae with questionable morals at the pack’s disposal.

Sousuke sets down the wendigo skull to plop beside Kisumi, dust billowing under his monstrous weight. He pants lightly and Kisumi smiles, tucking a wave of hair behind his pointed ear. The seelie lifts his brows at the wendigo head. “Have an fun trip?”

Sousuke’s ears flatten in irritation. Kisumi always expects the pack to have a conversation when they’re in their wolf forms and Sousuke’s not about to start yipping like a fucking dog, but Kisumi just giggles. “You lot are so grumpy in the mornings.”

He waves a hand and roots uncoil from the earth, herbs floating as Kisumi’s magic guides them into his wicker basket. He moves to rub the juncture of his neck and shoulder but decides not to, nose scrunching. His mating scar is still healing so it’s probably itchy as hell but he can’t bandage it because in werewolf culture, any covering would signify that Kisumi is ashamed of the bond. It’s a clumsy mark, too low on the throat and not as deep as it should be even though the seelie’s flesh is bunched in wrinkles and marred in a plum bruise. Asahi may have to bite him again in a few years but Kisumi wears the scar proudly either way.

The seelie finishes gathering herbs and bows his head to his little garden in thanks. The bushes
flutter and the flowers wave their leaves; Sousuke rolls his shoulders tensely, glancing around to see if the trees might spring from the ground to dance.

Kisumi rises but doesn’t stay standing for long – his translucent wings flutter with a hummingbird’s speed though he only hovers a couple feet from the ground. Sousuke hauls himself out of the dirt and picks up the wendigo skull with his teeth, waiting for the seelie to move. Kisumi grins and folds his arms, wicker basket hanging off his elbow. “Walking me home like a gentleman?”

With an impatient grumble, Sousuke’s head knocks the faerie’s foot and Kisumi’s laugh echoes through the trees.

They journey a few miles to Kisumi’s cottage, which lies just on the outskirts of the wolf den. Sousuke might have begrudgingly accepted the seelie’s union with Asahi, but his pack had rightful fears about letting an outsider into their home, so this was the closest Kisumi could get regardless that he and Asahi are mated. The cottage looks straight out of a children’s storybook; it’s shaped like a mushroom with a hay roof and its chimney puffs out odd, bluish smoke. The home looks inviting in a faintly surreal way, luring a sense of enchantment. It’s one of those fairytale sights that look just darling but in reality, the seelie living there could turn anyone into a living-dead wendigo.

Kisumi flutters to the ground and brushes off his silk tunic just as a howl pierces the air. Sousuke’s fur bristles, tail standing alert as his ears perk up. He recognizes that howl – that voice. Kisumi hides a smile at Sousuke’s wagging tail and gestures him away. “Go to them.”

Sousuke takes off like a shot, kicking up dirt and hurdling over fallen trunks. A family of rabbits dives to the side as butterflies and sprites scatter out of his path. He ducks under vines and charges through a stream, startling bite-sized water nymphs who let out disgruntled hisses at his carelessness. Another howl rises and swells with happiness, urging Sousuke to run faster – everything primal and sentimental inside of him goes haywire with the joy of coming back home to his den, his pack.

A bright shape shoots into his peripheral and Sousuke tumbles down the hill as another wolf tackles him. Sousuke shoves and pushes, throwing his weight in the wrestling match of play and coming out on top. Makoto yips, his eyes soothing as ever, even in the form of a honeyed wolf. Sousuke accepts his nuzzle begrudgingly, not appreciating a tackle as his greeting, but he’s happy to see his friend none the less.

More wolves break through the trees, a jovial hunting party that bays and gazes at their alpha like he hung the moon. The youngest wolf stands out with his timid bow and pristine blond fur – Sousuke’s told Romio that it’s useless to try and keep clean in an animal form, if not from the forest muck then by high-spirited wolves like Uozumi, who nips at Romio’s tail and urges the littlest wolf into a chase for rabbits through the mud.

Another form stumbles from the trees, a copper wolf with tufts of white at his ears and chest. Asahi approaches his alpha more subdued, hunkering down in submission before scampering away with more of his characteristic exuberance as he dashes off to visit his mate. Sousuke huffs after him and feels Makoto’s humor streak through the pack bond.

Sousuke closes his eyes to shift, his bones rearranging in a seamless flow, organs twisting as his frame alters itself into an upright position. His legs wobble and he falls back against a tree trunk.
with a gasp, his skin trembly and flushed after spending days as a wolf.

When he opens his eyes, Makoto is standing before him in khaki overalls, a flannel, and glasses – he’s a little too accustomed to society’s version of clothes, rather than what the pack traditional wears, which consists of fur drapes and linseed garments and leather made from animal skins. Makoto gawks at the wendigo skull. “Jesus,” he breathes. “I thought this was supposed to be a relaxing journey.”

“Oh.” Sousuke grimaces and rubs his throat – he’ll have more growl than voice for a few minutes. “Shit happened.”

“As it always does,” Makoto sighs, eyes crinkling shut with a smile.

Sousuke adjusts his pants and knee-length vest as they walk, brushing dirt off his bare chest – he hopes that he’ll look half-way decent in front of his pack. Nobody actually minds since being a werewolf means always having a grass blade or smudge somewhere on your person, but Sousuke would like to look a little presentable for his mother. They head toward the ruckus of the village and Sousuke pulls the wendigo skull along by an antler while muttering, “How’re the pups?”

“Chaotic as ever,” Makoto says, shaking his head in fond exasperation. Since the pups are stationed at the den for good now, Makoto is back to teaching them a bit of literacy and a little math, though survival training comes first – the incident at the daycare is reason enough for that decision.

Sousuke says, “Do any of them talk about missing school?”

“I think they’re sad,” Makoto admits quietly. He kicks a pinecone away with his dusty boot. “And they’re confused – not about why they can never go back to the city but because they don’t understand why it happened.”

Sousuke snorts, hauling the wendigo skull along and leaving a deep valley in the wake of their path. “Yeah, them and me both.” His nostrils flare on a heavy exhale. “Humans always need a war to fight.”

The omega gives Sousuke a look and aches a brow but he keeps his arms crossed in silence.

They break through the clearing and sunlight floods Sousuke’s vision. Pride brims in his chest and reverberates all down his spine as the village comes into view – a haze of smoke lingers over the settlement of cabins and huts built from wood, stone, and scrap metal. The scent of cooking fires is nostalgic in his heart, overwhelming him with peace because he knows that his pack is well-fed.

The air is lively with conversation as barefoot pups wail laughter and chase hens. Everyone stops what they’re doing when Sousuke passes them; they pause to greet their alpha with a bow or clasp forearms with him as relief swims through the pack bond, and Sousuke feels at home in the security of his people.

A shorter form breaches the fray of taller warriors who rushed up to greet Sousuke and the men make a path for the newcomer with their heads lowered respectfully. Satomi slinks forward with her mess of white hair, her ankle bangles singing with each step. Her sleeves are green feathers while the rest of her vest is made of golden fur – it’s a griffin pelt, which was her first kill after she presented as an alpha, and she still wears two of the beast’s claws as gauges.
Satomi dips into an exaggerated bow, her arms sweeping out in a zealous gesture as the crowd laughs at her antics. “Great Alpha, you’ve returned.”

“Stop it,” Sousuke chuckles, tossing the wendigo skull at her.

Satomi catches it without stumbling and her eyes triple in size as she breathes, “No way…” She punches his arm over and over in excitement. “*No way!* What the hell, this had to have been road kill, there’s no way you took down this thing by yourself.”

“Think what you want.” Sousuke kicks dust at her for hitting him. Makoto rolls his eyes with a smirk but is otherwise patient with their banter.

Satomi makes a face at her brother. “Actually, I believe it. You fuckin’ reek.” He smears a sweaty hand down her face and she almost bites him but he jerks back in time. Satomi shoves him – their version of a hug – before hauling the skull over her shoulder and leading Sousuke to the heart of the village.

Sousuke gives her a stern look. “You’ve taken good care of my pack, I assume?” His eyes shine with a teasing glint.

“Of course,” she huffs. As his adoptive sister, Satomi acts as the pack alpha when Sousuke is away. She bumps hips with him and almost sends him staggering. With batting lashes, she coos, “Have a fun rut all by yourself?”

“*Keep it down,*” he hisses, glancing this way and that as his face burns.

Satomi throws her head back to howl a laugh. “Please, I can smell it all over you. Don’t look behind us, there’s omegas *panting* after you.”

Sousuke knows she’s (probably) joking but he’s still too scared to look. “If you weren’t so *loud* about it –”

She swings the skull at him with another cackle. “You’re the one who *smells* so loud!” She upturns her nose with a smirk. “And I’m nowhere near as loud as the elders who say you should have found an omega to give you an heir *at least* sixty years ago.”

He taunts, “Think you can’t lead my pack?”

Her eyes nearly roll out of her head. “I can lead this pack just as good as you or any god-forsaken spawn of you.”

“Hmm.” He nudges an annoying elbow into her side. “Speaking of omegas, where’s yours?”

“Zaki-chan is sulking,” Satomi sighs, blowing her bangs out of her face. She desperately needs a haircut but she despises them so much that it ends up with their mother chasing her around the compound with a trimming knife, which is just bad for the pups to see. “She’s upset because she had to quit her job at that dance studio in the city.”

Sousuke feels guilty about that, however – “It’s for her own safety.”

“I know that, but she doesn’t.” Satomi’s brows crease, voice aching with sorrow like never before. “She’s been a wolf for less than a year but I thought she’d understand our ways by now.”
Sousuke’s chest tightens with concern. “I told Yazaki that she can leave at any time; I’d rather her go back to the city than feel out of place here.”

“Yeah, well.” Satomi scowls as they hike up the tallest hill to the elder’s hut, the sun beating on their backs. “Her family is afraid of having a wolf in the house. Humans think it isn’t natural to blend with us. Maybe we’re more like them than I thought.” A shadow haunts her face. “I don’t like it.”

They approach the hut – the exterior is hardened mud and smoke dances from the circular hole in the roof. It’s a primitive structure built from nature, which is where the elders believe all werewolves belong. Sousuke pulls the fur curtain back for Satomi to step through and he ducks in to follow her into the red-darkness. The heat from the firepit encompasses him and the aroma of incense is thick in the confined space. Raccoon tails and corn stalks hang from the walls with old tapestries of faded beadwork. The elders sit on the dirt floor with fur capes broadening their shoulders; face-paint creases their leathery wrinkles, their sunken eyes ancient as stone. They look like gargoyles to Sousuke, millenniums of life shaping their bodies into grotesque hunches.

One alpha woman stands out in the lot with her snow leopard furs and she rises from the ground to cup Sousuke’s face with a brief but relieved smile. Kaori looks to be in her mid-thirties but she stands with her shoulders squared, her chin high with the confidence that comes from winning battles for decades. His mother’s skin is paler than most, her freckles dark and her long hair pulled back by a headband of braided vines. Sousuke wishes he looked more like her but at least they have the same eyes.

His mother leads him to sit by her and they wait for Makoto to appear at the curtain, disheveled from chasing the pups that were terrorizing the pack’s chickens. He is complacent in the elder’s presence but he manages not to cower under their harsh glances. The elders, firm in their ancient beliefs, do not approve of Sousuke having an omega as his most trusted friend, but Makoto has proven himself to be as bloodthirsty as any alpha when the pack is threatened. He’s rooted in morality but Sousuke appreciates that; he’s lost his head to the heat of battle far too many times and Makoto is always there as the voice of reason.

This is Sousuke’s pack; the elders will have to deal with Makoto’s importance. It might make Sousuke look even worse in their eyes but he’s already as low as the ground to them, due to his recent mistake of allowing wolf families to migrate into the city with the hope that their pups might blend into human society. That backfired and now there are traumatized pups who may never trust human emotion again – no empathy, no joy, and it’s Sousuke’s fault for allowing those families to go into the city.

He takes a breath that’s too loud in the judgmental silence. “We will retaliate against the humans.”

The group is visibly pleased by the promise of bloodshed, especially his mother. Satomi sits with the wendigo skull between her bent knees, tapping a hollow rhythm across the bone. “I did some reconnaissance in the city while you were away, alpha. The parents that stoned our pups posted bond.” The elders, far out of touch with such a custom, look impatient in their confusion. Satomi rushes, “They’ve been released from jail.” She works her jaw and her eyes drink the firelight. “But they are aware of our oncoming fury; they’ve been meeting at a warehouse near the fence line to join a bigger group who hopes to counter our efforts.”

An elder nods, mouth twisted in an ugly scowl. With a voice thick as tar, she croaks, “They intend to drive out all mystics from the city by force.”
A man snorts, taking an indulgent drag of his pipe with his unruly brows lifted. “It’s a wise notion, at least.”

“A notion rooted in blind fear,” Kaori snarls. “And that fear will make them clumsy. This will be an easy battle for you, Sousuke.”

Makoto swallows hard and his voice is timid with softness. “The humans that harmed the pups – they’re parents. They have children of their own.” He hesitates, but the look he gives Sousuke says what his courage cannot.

One woman rolls her eyes in utter exhaustion of what Makoto is implying, but she humors him – depreciatingly so. “Do you not think those children are in danger being raised by parents with such violent tendencies?”

Makoto’s demeanor sharpens. “I think our children could be in danger if we exhibit such tendencies.”

The elders bristle and a man almost snaps at Makoto for his audacity, but Sousuke lifts a hand and everything stills once more. Makoto continues, “I am perhaps nothing more than my biological inclination to you.” His eyes are normally vibrant as the woodlands, but his glare reminds Sousuke that there is nothing more lethal than a forest fire. “I have lived long enough to see history repeat itself. All the wars are the same regardless of origin or whether they were born from human or supernatural selfishness.” He lifts his chin. “Children do not belong in our fights.”

“The humans put our pups in this fight, Makoto,” Sousuke says gently.

He doesn’t falter. “Our pups still have their parents; the human children will not.”

An elder lashes through a gesture with a voice that shakes the walls. “Enough!” He fumes at Makoto. “This is not a debate about morals; this meeting is to discuss a plan of retaliation in the name of our young.”

“That’s not what this is about,” Makoto hisses under his breath.

The man sneers – he’s an old fool driven by ranks, blind to the fact that Makoto towers over him and could crush his skull in a flash. “Your philosophy is meaningless here; your instincts will make you do what is right by our pups, omega.”

Makoto casts a flat glance at the ceiling but he falls silent. Sousuke is angered by the elder’s words but his mother puts a hand on his knee with a firm look - liberation is a defiance that has no place in this hut, but under the elders’ shepherding, Sousuke feels more like a lamb than a wolf.

Satomi nudges Makoto’s knee in a subtle display of comfort before clearing her throat. “What are your orders, alpha?”

Sousuke sighs and Makoto looks up hopefully, but the alpha briefly winces in apology. “The humans are biologically driven to create conflict – they always have been and they always will. If we do nothing, they will consider themselves victors and will wield that confidence by continuing to harass us.” He levels their gazes. “When we fight back, we are getting the upper-hand in an inevitable war. Bloodshed will come whether it’s done by our claws or not.”
Makoto’s voice is a grief-stricken snarl ripping through their bond. *We were human once, too.*

Sousuke tenses before looking away, mouth firmed into a line. “Satomi, you will take a small party and I to this warehouse tonight.”

Her smirk is wholly animal. “It will be my greatest pleasure, alpha.”

Sousuke braces himself as he exits the hut and they’re barely out of earshot when Makoto hisses, “*You’re afraid of them.*”

The alpha bristles and Makoto’s instincts shoot him into a bow before he can control it. “Sorry,” he rushes. Slowly, he rises to a proper stand with his eyes closed in frustration. Sousuke doesn’t even think about chastising him, not with such guilt knifing his chest. Makoto says, “I know I was out of line –”

“You stay out of line.” But he doesn’t say it meanly.

Makoto huffs a laugh, shoulders dropping with the relief that he’s okay with Sousuke. His voice is weary. “I’m sorry, but you know the elders’ way of thinking isn’t going to work for much longer. I could see it on your face in there.”

“There is no other way for us,” Sousuke says. He notices a pine trunk lodged in a ditch by the road; it probably fell out of a truck on the way to the woodyard where the wolves build their homes.

Sousuke hauls the trunk out and shoulders it, arms bulging, biceps swelling as he braces the weight of it. He heads toward the woodyard but Makoto scampers after him. “We can learn, Sousuke.”

Makoto stands in his path and hesitates before lifting his chin. “We’ve never lived in a time like this.”

Sousuke rests his weight on a hip, arm curling tighter around the trunk to balance it. “Silver bullets are the same as silver arrowheads, Makoto. We’ve been in wars before and will win this one just the same.”

He sidesteps Makoto but the omega hurries after him. “Humans know about us now; that’s never happened before so we can’t approach this the same way that we always have.”

Sousuke’s brow twitches down at that. Stubbornly, he makes his way through the village, pausing when a group of pups kicks a ball across the road. As he waits for them to rush after it, a little girl wobbles up to him – she’s barely old enough to walk straight but she beams up at him as she presents a braided string. Sousuke’s voice warms with endearment. “What do you have there?”

“You! For you!” She waves the string like a flag.

He smiles and holds his wrist out for the bracelet, patient as she ties it, and he chuckles when she gleefully skips away. The woodyard breaches the distance when Makoto steps in his path again, and Sousuke looks to the heavens with a sigh. “What do you want me to do, Makoto?” He rakes a hand through his hair and it comes out hot with sweat. “The elders are angry enough with me and I’m not going back on my word.”

Makoto crosses his arms. “This is your pack. Not theirs.” His expression softens. “Tell me what
your heart is saying, rather than what your wolf is.”

Sousuke’s gaze drifts to his new bracelet as he thinks, and his fist clenches with the shame that bolts through him. He continues his walk and Makoto deflates until Sousuke subtly nods him closer, glancing about. Keeping his gaze forward, he mutters, “I’m not going to jeopardize me or mine by avoiding any parents at that warehouse. If they’re killed, they’re killed.”

Makoto’s gaze drifts to the ground, bangs shadowing his eyes.

Sousuke adds, “I plan on scaring some sense into them, but I won’t make an effort to target any parents.”

Understanding dawns on Makoto’s face. He breaks out in an elated smile and Sousuke rolls his eyes, “Now help me with this fucking trunk, nobody can see me drop it.”

Makoto laughs as he moves behind Sousuke to shoulder the back of the trunk. “You can’t drop it, yet you can be seen with such a helpless omega assisting you?”

Sousuke scoffs, “You wish you were a helpless omega. Don’t deny it, I’ve seen how much you preen under all the attention at courting festivals.”

“And I’ve seen you run for the hills when omegas approach you,” his friend taunts with a grin. “You act like spending ruts alone is a burden of leadership when you’re actually just weird.”

Sousuke bristles, head whipping around. His gaze darts to the nearest cabin, where two figures are curled up on the porch steps. With all the authority in his being, he booms, “Satomi!”

His sister startles up from where she was lounging between Yazaki’s thighs and Sousuke nods back at Makoto with wide-eyed stiffness. Satomi hides her smirking face behind the wendigo skull and Makoto chuckles. “She didn’t tell me you had a rut; I could smell it on you when you were still miles from the den.”

Sousuke pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’d have an heir myself if it would get everyone off my back about it.”

“Now who’s the helpless omega?” Makoto kicks the back of Sousuke’s leg to get him walking once more. “Don’t worry, I have every faith that you’ll meet your mate soon.”

“An oracle now, are we?”

“Nope.” Makoto tips his head with a smile. “Just always right.”
Chapter End Notes

- special thank you to the wonderful bakapandy for wolfsuke~! go follow her on tumblr | twitter

- chapter title of "a wolf's liberation": though the quote i used says the liberty for wolves is death to the lambs, the symbolism of lambs can be used in this context for sousuke as well as makoto: sousuke is the "lamb" to the elders' "wolf" in that he did not stand up to them, but his "liberation" is following his heart rather than primitive instinct, going against their direct wishes, and thus, becoming more of a wolf than a lamb; doing what is right is his liberation - not bloodshed. and his decision reverses the roles, making the elders' judgement the "lambs" of the situation. the elders consider makoto meek for his rank (so, like a lamb in this sense) but his "liberation" is still standing up for what's right.

- the a/b/o dynamics: even though there's so much talk about sousuke having an heir, this is not an mpreg story & it's not a central focus, though that concept is mentioned as it is part of the culture - however, vampires can't have babies, neither can any other males save for omegan werewolves, so that's not going to be a sourin thing (& no, makoto will not procreate with haru - vampires cannot make babies in any form). the notion of an heir is set up as a conflict, not as foreshadowing.

- the elders' traditionalist views are supposed to seem unfair; you're supposed to read them as wrong. this is commentary on leaders who refuse to evolve & break away from traditionalist values that are harmful, as well as the repercussions of such stubbornness. sousuke does not share their views as told through his interactions with
makoto, but his arc is ultimately one of liberation.

- this is so unnecessary to share but i picture the gnomes to talk like the minions banana song blame my bb nephew

whew anyway lol onto **character motifs / themes**! (i know some wolves only had brief appearances but for those who have more importance in the upcoming chapters, i'll go ahead and leave their themes here too)

- the pack: [ancient voices mashup by day 39](#)
- sousuke: [hand of time by brand x music](#)
- kisumi: [listen with your heart [instrumental] by alan menken](#)
- asahi: [agni kai remastered by n'ayam amarsh’e](#)

lemme just slide this cute lil inspo for ikigai!asakisu in here cough [siulil a run by celtic woman](#)

- makoto: [ben-hur by marco beltrami](#)
- romio: [new tail by john powell](#)
- satomi (this song gets me **SO PUMPED**): [norwegian pirate by two steps from hell](#)
- kaori: [credits by jeremy zuckerman](#)

**up next**: sourin meet

come say hey on [twitter](#) & [curious cat](#)
Chapter Summary

Sousuke cannot even name what – who he is looking at. The word vampire is so distant in his mind yet he knows that this boy is not human.

But Sousuke’s wolf knows exactly who this boy is.

Mate.

Chapter Notes

hello! i hope you're doing well; i'm in the midst of finals and research papers so this update took a bit (and i completed my makoharu mermaid au coral and bone), but i am very happy to finally share it and i hope you enjoy :) thank you so much for the support of this story, i appreciate it so much.

yall dont drag me for using the game of thrones "moon of my life" / "my sun and stars" those lines were made for natsunao ok

the vampires conservatory was inspired by a pc game i played as a child: nancy drew and the curse of blackmoor manor, go watch a youtube walkthrough of it if ya got a free afternoon and some snacks, it's a fascinating story i love to go back to.

note: i know that vampires in literature are not typically affected by silver, but in ikigai, they are as in danger of it as werewolves are.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I in a vision saw my lost sweetheart.

Fearlessly toward me I saw her stray.

So pale! I thought then;

She in the night sang: “My heart, my spirit I’ve kissed away.

We are but phantoms, like now in death.”

My voice I heard then:

“Give me again but

My heart, my spirit,—

You alone found them
Of all that sought.”

- "Meeting of Phantoms" by Anders Österling

In 1732, the London Journal wrote a story of particularly supernatural interest, a testimony that took place in Hungary. A one Arnold Paul proclaimed that he was tormented by the likes of an evil spirit who wore the stolen flesh of a man; though these specific “torments” were not accounted for in detail, the story fed the public’s hunger to be afraid.

People need something to fear, Rin thinks. Something to blame dark thoughts upon, an excuse to revel in the glories of murderous sin.

Arnold Paul claimed to have rid himself of a vampire by eating dirt from the monster’s grave, though his earnest resolve and confusing tactics did not stop him from becoming a creature of the night himself. Upon being found out by his fellow townsman, Paul was spiked: a term Rin and the other vampires use for being pierced through the heart with a stake. Certain materials of said stake might assure damage upon the vampire, but only iron or silver – the “holy metals,” if you will – can promise such damage. Dying will only occur if the vampire is also decapitated and burned in that order.

Eating dirt. Rin almost scoffs at the thought. Humans just cannot accept the truth. He visualizes that fool of a man shoving cud into his mouth, swallowing mud or whatever else might have helped him feel close to a natural being. Once the Change has begun, no amount of prayer or pleading will keep your heart beating, as the poets say.

Rin was not graced with such doom when he was bitten; he traded what was left of his soul and never looked back. It was the smartest decision he ever made.

He always thinks of Arnald Paul’s story when he visits Nao in the conservatory – dirt has always smelled the same but Rin simply likes to think about that hayduke and imagine how shocked he would be of Nao. Rin considers how he would have reacted: perhaps he would have been fearful of a vampire’s presence alone, however, some people are not wise enough to be afraid of Nao.

Given that Rin’s monarchy of a family resides underground in the sewers, there aren’t many places in the subterranean castle in which natural light thrives. Nao found this part of the sewers like he was drawn to it, and when Natsuya realized that Nao could feel warmth, it devastated him. Nao is old; he tastes and feels more than other vampires do because even immortality has a timestamp, and the more his body recalls human sensation, the less time he has on this earth as a walking corpse.

Rin’s gaze sweeps the conservatory, which has the splendor of romantic catacombs rather than the depressiveness of bleak sewers. The ground is patterned in diamond-shaped cobblestone; the walls are towering and lead up to a street grate above. He listens to heels clacking across the sidewalks overhead, smells asphalt and the reek of pollution that grows fouler as the years tick by. Listening to pedestrians converse is like going to the library, though their stories are rarely interesting. Most commonly, Rin hears work complaints or dull gossip. And oh, can he smell – blood warmed by sun-beaten skin, and he imagines throats that are sweaty and supple in the heat.

Sunlight beams down in roaming pillars like spotlights and Rin tenses each time the light creeps a bit too close. Though he is paranoid about being in daylight, Rin can admit that the conservatory is enchanting with its palette of greys and greenery – there’s stone benches with curtains of vines, and
there’s a fountain that holds no water but is still charming as it is guarded by a circle of statues toads. There’s some fruit trees and tropical plants which are saturated in magic; Rin’s favorites are a fat gourd slumped with fatigue, but if you dare to pry it open, the plant will swallow you to cage you in its belly until suffocation takes you. He also has a particular admiration for a Venus Fly Trap that stands taller than himself with fangs just as sharp.

He enjoys the smell of this air – the sundew doesn’t conjure up any specific memories, but perhaps that’s why he’s so charmed with the place. After walking this planet for some hundred and seventy years, there aren’t many new or different things to smell, and the conservatory holds its own atmosphere of eerie tranquility, much like Nao himself.

Nao sorts through a table of voodoo lilies and basil, the herbalism of spells. His robes are white like a biblical rose, his eyes moonlit with blindness. Nao smirks, “You’re bobbing your ankle something fierce.”

Rin looks down at his ankle and stops. Nao chuckles and gestures to the side, calling, “Gloom, come help me with this, would you?”

A dark mass comes from beneath the table and stirs into the light; the fox is bigger than her natural counterpart and far more ethereal with her foggy-grey pelt and beady, red eyes. She slinks up to Nao and grabs a basket with her teeth, holding it up for her master to drop a few plant trimmings inside. Gloom trots over to the monstrous fridge in the corner, which is built like an industrial safe, and Nao walks over to Rin. He easily remembers the path to the bench in the familiar space, and he sits down while settling his robes. His motions are ginger – weak.

Rin used to stare at him whenever they were in close proximity or standing across the room. Nao’s bangs cover the scar gouging across his forehead, clawing through his eyes and down to hook under his jaw – Rin always feels a dull spike of sympathetic pain at the sight of him. He often wonders just how powerful the werewolf must have been to leave a vampire blind and doomed to wear such scars.

Nao doesn’t talk about it and Natsuya won’t let anyone ask. But since Natsuya isn’t here –

“How long has it been since you saw a werewolf?” Rin asks.

The elder vampire lifts his brows in humored surprise. “I haven’t seen much of anything in millennia, child.”

“Forgive me,” he rushes, face burning in mortification, but Nao waves him off with amusement.

Nao crosses his legs with a faint wince, the halter chains of his cape glittering like black stones underwater. “What’s brought forth such a question in your mind?” Nao sounds curious rather than offended, though a knowing look creeps over his features. “Have you gone and enamored yourself with some trouble or do you intend to seek it out?”

“It’s just a question.”

“It’s never just a question, Rin.” He relaxes with leisure posture as he drinks in the sunshine. Nao props his head on a hand, absently combing through his silken hair. “If you gain no knowledge from my time residing amongst you royals, trust that no question ever comes without a motive.”

Rin tuck his hands between his knees, flustering. “You’ve taught me more than just that,” he
Nao’s smile is endeared in a backhanded sort of way. “You learn what you want to.” He tucks his hands together so that his long sleeves close over them. “Werewolves and vampires are two sides of the same coin; lycanthropic metamorphosis is a disease at the base of it all, much like vampirism.”

Defensiveness works through him. “Pray tell.”

Nao considers. “Well, we both started out as humans – vampirism began as a reanimating disease that possessed corpses; the sickness originated in the bloodstream of the deceased. Back in my day, if you’ll humor me –” Rin cuts a brief smirk. “— The phenomenon of the lycans spread like rabies because it’s simply a mutated strain of that sickness. Lycanthropic metamorphosis is a disease much like vampirism, though their contagion originated from wolves, and it mutates their genomes with that of wolves.”

Rin says, “Shouldn’t werewolves be easy to fight, then? If they are nothing more than animals.”

“Werewolves are unpredictable; the only knowledge that you can bring to such a fight is that if a werewolf gets ahold of you, it’s all over.”

Sympathy runs through Rin’s chest. “I’m – I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to resurface grim memories.”

Nao surprises him by chuckling, though it is a tired sound. “Bitterness if no way to live, I made my peace with my circumstances many moons ago.” His voice grows quiet with thoughtfulness. “I never once felt anger toward that wolf despite that I was supposed to, perhaps. Both vampires and werewolves are lost to the ideal that we are mortal enemies – how interesting it would be if we both realized that concept was glamorized by the authors that depicted us as fantasy.” He turns one of his rings, a band of fool’s gold that won’t char him. “Kind of poetic that silver harms both vampires and werewolves, don’t you think?”

“We’re nothing alike,” Rin scowls.

Nao’s smile is slow and pitying at the blind lash of resentment. “Werewolves might heavily rely on their instincts, yes, but they are not mindless – more importantly, they are not heartless. If you harm a single one, their pack will not rest until your insides flow.” He lifts his brows. “They love one another and it shows in the way they fight.”

“I want to kill one,” Rin says, squaring his shoulders.

Nao rolls his eyes in grand exasperation. “Trophy hunting is not exactly the appropriate way to blend into modern society.”

“I don’t care. I’m going to do it.”

“Then I’m assuming by your enthusiasm that you’ve never killed one before?”

Rin curls into himself and Nao smirks like he knows. “No,” Rin mumbles, looking away. “I’ve fought them in brief squabbles but father always orders me to flee before it can get fun.”

“You mean dangerous.”
Rin pouts. “Father’s killed pack alphas before; it’s not fair that I don’t have a wolf’s head mounted above my bed when Gou’s got dozens of them all over the castle.”

“Gou is a better warrior than you are.” Nao’s expression doesn’t change even though Rin’s agitation is tangible. Gloom hops onto the elder vampire’s lap and he pets her tail in dragging strokes. “Gou takes orders well. You, on the other hand, storm into battle just like Natsuya.” He shakes his head with a playful tut. “You glory-seeking fools.”

Rin laughs before his ears prickle at the doors groaning apart. Natsuya strides in, his curls disheveled and his gait sluggish since it’s daytime and most vampires in the castle are sleeping at this hour. Evening is nearing; Natsuya must have just awoken, since his sleeping tunic is stuffed into his trousers and he’s still adjusting his leather suspenders.

Natsuya clambers down the stairs with a metallic echo and his posture straightens when he notices Nao. Natsuya rushes to kneel before his mate, hands fretting over him. “What the devil are you doing up here alone?”

“Rin’s right here,” Nao smiles, letting himself be petted. “So is Gloom. Or have you gone as blind as I am?”

Natsuya gives him a flat look. “Your cynical humor is hardly appropriate.” He adjusts Nao’s robes tighter around his middle, knotting the sash again. “Imagine my dismay when I woke up only to realize that you had vanished.” He rises and goes over to the hulking fridge; the door hisses open and Natsuya takes out an ornate pitcher before fetching a gauntlet from under the table. He bows the pitcher and blood oozes into the cup – Rin thinks it smells like O Positive.

Natsuya calls, “Would you like any, Rin?”

“No thanks.” He’s a glutton for Type A through and through.

Natsuya hands the gauntlet to Nao before pointing a finger at Gloom to address the fox. “You and I discussed this, I told you to wake me up the instant Nao is discomforted.” She tries to nip his fingers and Natsuya yanks his hand back with an offended pout.

“I apologize for worrying you,” Nao says before taking a deep swallow from his gauntlet. His dainty fingers rearrange his husband’s mess of curls. “I’ve been asleep for a week; you knew that I was bound to wake up eventually.”

Natsuya is barely quelled. He stands behind Nao to rub his shoulders in gentle circles, pulling his hair into a fist to massage his neck. Nao’s throat is blotched in little plums from where Natsuya’s drank from him. “I wish you would not have exerted yourself with the climb up here.”

“You’re more than welcome to carry me back to bed when I’m ready,” Nao smiles. That won’t be long, Rin thinks – nowadays, Nao can barely stay awake for a few hours before falling into a disturbingly long slumber.

To reassure him, Nao traces the mating scar on Natsuya’s wrist – it’s a crescent bite in the shape of Nao’s teeth. His sleeve rolls down to reveal his mating scar from Natsuya, and that bite is deeper. Natsuya’s fangs probably drove in with a fit of passion, earnest in the pain he gave because it would bind them for eternity. The mark Nao left on Natsuya’s wrist is clean and precise, perfectly aligned on the inside of Natsuya’s forearm.
Natsuya regards Rin, canting his hip as he crosses his arms. His motions are far more spry than Nao’s; from the whispers of gossip that travel through the vampire court, Rin’s heard that Natsuya is ancient but he’s a few centuries younger than Nao. He’s got a while before he loses his vigor – the wicked glint in his eye says as much. “Rumor ‘round the castle is that you’re going on a little hunt tonight.” He lifts his chin. “I want in.”

Rin bristles. “Who –” He groans when he realizes. “Goddamn you, Haru.”

“It was wise of Haru to inform me of your plan,” Natsuya says, eyes half-lidded with a lazy sort of confidence. “You’ve never took on a werewolf by yourself.”

“A werewolf has never faced me alone,” Rin counters with excitement brewing in his chest.

Natsuya rolls the heel of his boot back and forth in a subtle taunt. “So, your darling plan was to charge into this piss-poor revolution, throw yourself onto the back of the nearest rabid thing, slice its throat open in one fell swoop and sashay along the primrose path to victory?”

“Sounds like something you would do,” Nao drones into his gauntlet as he gives his husband a pointed look of amusement.

Natsuya gives a coy head-tilt, shrugging with a smirk.

A hiss of agitation stirs in Rin’s throat and Nao pats his shoulder, chuckling. “Ah, come now, Rin. Bringing Natsuya along will hardly slow you down on your quest for a wolf head.”

“I don’t want anyone else with me,” Rin says, clenching his fists with the agitation of a child. “Haru isn’t even coming, he’s just –”

“Trying to protect you,” Nao translates. He arches a brow. “How do you even hope to find these werewolves? I was oblivious to the fact that you suddenly took up tracking.”

Rin blinks. “Well, I – I’m not, but – I was the one who found out the wolves had been to the Ninth Circle!” He upturns his nose with a satisfied grin full of teeth. “I tracked them that far. Finding them again won’t be hard.”

“Isuzu told you the wolves were visiting the demons.” Nao takes a judgmental sip of his drink, propping his elbow on the bench as his cape chains sing at the motion. “Natsuya hunted werewolves for centuries; he is just as barbaric as you in this primitive desire for a hunt, so I’m sure you’ll have fun.”

Natsuya scoffs, “I’ve been good.” He takes Nao’s gauntlet to sweep up both his hands in dreamy grandeur. “Don’t you recall our journeys through Bavaria, all of Austria? I chased those hounds all across Europe –”

“For the better half of the 17th century,” Nao drones, unimpressed.

“— And then there was Switzerland! Where we watched the trials of wolf-charmers and witches –”

Nao arches a brow with a slow smirk. “I don’t remember watching anything.” His bleak eyes widen for emphasis.
Rin hides a snort in his collar and Natsuya goes stiff with a blush. “My point is,” Natsuya says, “I haven’t tracked down wolves in a long time. Hell, I’ve barely chased rabbits over the last decade. I’ve stayed right here and acted as an advisor for the Matsuokas –”

“But a life of peace is as dull as a life of celibacy and isolation to you,” Nao rephrases. He hears Natsuya’s boots shuffle and he grins, voice softening. “I know. It was very sweet of you to indulge me in a slower pace for a time.” He reaches in the direction of his gauntlet and Natsuya puts it back in his hand with delicate care. Nao pats his hand. “But I know who I married. Just be careful.”

Natsuya lights up with boyish excitement and Rin rolls his eyes as he stands. “Fine, whatever.” He brushes off pollen that he cannot see, but the smell of it irritates him. “Keep it quiet, we’ll be leaving soon.”

Natsuya tenses. Worries his lip. “Ah. Well, about that –”

The doors groan apart as another person slithers in. His approach is bolstering and he wears a sleeveless drape that falls to his knees; Rin hears the shift of leather tights, the creak of his fighting boots, and knows in an instant that Natsuya Kirishima will never be able to keep his fucking mouth shut.

Ikuya pushes his hood back and the light saturates his teal hair, accentuating the lavender hues of his paleness. His eyes are always half-lidded from the boredom of existing, though his gaze pulses with interest as he regards Rin. “Nii-chan tells me you have plans tonight.” His voice is a murmuring slur, deep but sweet.

Rin turns a flat look of annoyance at Natsuya, who sweeps his arms out in defeat. He grins as he throws an arm over his little brother’s shoulder. “Surely, you can resonate with Ikuya’s wish to claim a trophy of his own, dear prince.” Ikuya shrugs off his arm. Natsuya props an annoying elbow on Ikuya’s shoulder instead.

“I just want something to do,” Ikuya explains with a shrug.

Rin gives a long sigh and nods up at the street grate. “Just be up top in twenty minutes. We need to hurry before Haru goes and tells the whole castle of my plans. If word gets to my father, he’ll forbid me from going or worse, he’ll order Gou to come and protect me.”

“He’d forbid both of you from going,” Natsuya says as he lifts his brows. “Our relations with the humans are tense enough – if he finds out about an uprising, I’m sure it will disappoint him. He’s tried so hard to make things work.” He scowls as a shadow haunts his face. “Despite my advice to do the exact opposite.”

Nao’s voice lulls carefully. “You will need to tell Toraichi, Rin. Though this uprising is supposedly aimed at the werewolves, all mystics are the same to humans. It will only be a matter of time before they find fault with us.”

Fierce resolve burns through Rin. “I will tell him after I come home with that alpha’s head and I have proven that I can lead my people in this inevitable war.”

“They’re settled.” Natsuya straightens his suspenders with a giddy jump to his voice. “Be not worried; you’ll put on the show that you’ve wanted to for so long. All it takes is some faith and a little noise.”
Ikuya slinks to the exit and Rin follows him out but not before Natsuya bows to frame Nao’s face for a sweet peck, murmuring, “Be well, moon of my life.”

Nao’s smile is hazy from the kiss. “Only if you are, my sun and stars.”

Ikuya falls in step with Rin as they walk down the corridor, the torchlight painting a waxy, glossy texture across the stone walls. Ikuya arches a brow at him with a once-over. “Are you seriously going for the alpha?”

Rin nods. “I have a lot to prove.”

Ikuya laughs and his voice takes on an odd, weathered lowness. “You have nothing to prove; none of us really do.”

Rin suddenly remembers how much older Ikuya is than himself – how much more time the world has had to beat him down.

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**By nature,** humans are fickle creatures. Dishonesty is an embedded trait of survival; indecisiveness is a tactic in which they clumsily navigate their lives, and their revolutions are just as graceless.

Sousuke follows Satomi to a warehouse on the outskirts of the city a few hundred yards from a collapsed overpass. Nobody comes here except stray dogs and ghouls – lost, lonely things. He could not have found a more predictable place and the fact that the humans have the confidence to meet in such a secluded location worries him. Are they armed to the teeth or are they simply fools for not realizing that nobody will hear them scream if they’re attacked in wide open desolation?

The warehouse sits in a tan ocean of wheat and dust itches Sousuke’s nose, a headache spiking at the odor of rusted equipment. The night holds an invigorating chill and the stars watch on as Sousuke and a small number of his pack creep from the woods in their human forms.

He tastes the heat of life in the air and follows it. A few humans linger around their vehicles, which are parked around the warehouse in a clumsy fray. The array of pickups to minivans lets Sousuke know what kind of people have joined together in the name of revenge against mystics. Humans from all walks of life are here: construction workers complaining over cigarettes about stolen jobs, fathers protesting the monsters in their children’s classrooms. The latter complainers find themselves facedown on the busted hoods of their vehicles, not dead – Sousuke promised Makoto – but sure to wake with concussions and a new outlook on threatening their pack.

Sousuke and Satomi wait for another wave of cars to drive up and they sneak past their headlights to hide behind a stack of crates. They look through one of the warehouse’s busted windows on the ground floor; it’s an open space with equipment pushed to the walls to make room for the crowd, and there’s a stage build from pallets.

“Fuck,” Sousuke whispers, listening to the rigorous hollers inside. “There’s so many people.”
Satomi crouches beside him, bringing forth a wave of sweat and dirt. She peers through the bars as her voice rolls into a growl. “The elders were right, for once – ain’t no way all these people are here just on account of our pups.” They watch a man inside raise his fist as he goes into some confusing philosophy about having a heartbeat and being real, but everyone around him blindly agrees. Satomi scowls, “This is about taking down all mystics; this is bigger than us. Bigger crowd than we were expecting, too.”

Sousuke shakes his head as he gazes on, his mouth in a bitter line. He sniffs and lets the aromas settle in his lungs. He hasn’t seen anyone carrying a gun yet, but he picks apart the smells of brass, iron, aluminum – though such materials might seem obvious to smell at a factory, Sousuke only notices that particular array of substances around firearms.

Silver burns up his nostrils.

“They’re not as dumb as they look,” Sousuke mumbles, eyes narrowing. “There’s silver in there.”

She inhales and a chill works down her arms. “Bullets or daggers?”

He shakes his head in frustration. “I don’t know, but it’s definitely not just jewelry I’m smelling.”

“What do you want to do, then?”

Sousuke weighs his options and she impatiently nudges his shoulder to talk it out. “We could send enough of a message by just setting their cars on fire; being alone out here will strike plenty of fear in them –”

Satomi arches a sly brow. “But…?”

His expression hardens. “They hurt our pups.”

“Now there’s the alpha I know.” Her grin is short-lived as they hide from another wave of headlights.

Sousuke whispers, “We need to get in there and try to do a little reconnaissance before we make a scene; Mako and Yazaki blend in well, so let’s see what their plans are.”

She nods. “All right, let’s find a way to sneak in and –”

Two trunks – legs – step into their path. Sousuke and Satomi look up the hulking frame to see Makoto with his arms crossed. He hisses, “What are you two doing?!”

The siblings glance at each other and Makoto drags a hand down his face. Impatiently, he whispers, “You’re both in human form, there’s no need for you to be sneaking around like this!”

“… oh,” Sousuke drones, looking down at himself.

Makoto fumes a sigh, eyes darting this way and that as he gestures them to stand. “Come on, Yazaki and I found somewhere inside that we can sit. It’s about to start.”

Rin crouches on a support beam in the warehouse’s ceiling, draped in protective shadow from his vantage point. He takes haggard breaths through his mouth, his senses on fire with exhilaration; his
vision swims red at each motion below and it feels like a candle is pressed against his throat. The heartbeats in the air boom like an orchestra all around him.

He knew that he would be thirsty, not drinking any blood before coming here, but Rin did it on purpose so that he would be twice as sharp. He will fight with double the vigor once he sinks his nails into that alpha’s fur, peeling back his pelt to bite into his heart.

Yes, he knew that he would be thirsty but why is he famished all at once?

His stomach churns on nothing, veins aching to be filled with blood – there’s a degree of those feelings at all times but never this abruptly. People file into the warehouse and it’s as if he has starved himself for a year. He wavers, bracing a hand on the beam as his eyes sink closed with nausea.

A hand falls onto his shoulder. “Oi, you all right?”

Rin swallows only for acidic venom to flood his mouth again. He nods in response and opens his eyes to see Natsuya crouched beside him. His gaze is trained on the movement below and the lower-half of his profile is hidden by his trench collar, but his eyes tell all – they surge as his voice hushes with elation. “The wolves are here. Do you smell them?”

Rin scrunches his nose. “Not really.” He smells different aromas from the crowd – cheap shampoo and disgustingly sweet fabric softener – but Rin cannot focus on anything other than hunger.

“Try harder,” Natsuya insists. “We smell blood more strongly than anything else but first try to look for their other scents. Think of grime, perspiration. You should feel a little pressure on your tongue when you spot them – that’s your instincts telling you danger is near. Your fangs might pop out.”

Rin licks his lips and parts them to breathe in – scents tickle across his damp lip, rolling up the roof of his mouth. There’s the ripe odor of sweat but that could be from anyone, not just wolves… he focuses on the hint of something sweet – “Honey?”

“Tree sap,” Natsuya corrects with an encouraging nod. “They carry that smell from the woods. You’re getting closer.”

Rin looks down at the crowd as if that will help him. His gaze becomes unfocused as a stronger aroma breaches his senses like a film tightening over his skin, enveloping him. His raspy inhale is desperate and Natsuya’s eyes widen.

That smell. The hunger. They’re on in the same.

Ikuya looks up from where he’s lounging on top of an industrial fan that juts out from the wall. He props an elbow on his raised knee as his gaze sweeps Rin lazily. “What’s with him?”

Rin smells –

His voice unravels in a whisper. “Blood.”

It’s not the dull ooze inside the humans; it’s not the bitterness he’d find in a rat’s veins.

This is like tasting God.
He can only imagine how rich in color the person’s blood is, like a liquid rose, like sweet fire that Rin would open his mouth to swallow. All of his teeth ache to bite and his fangs throw vibrations around his skull. He wants, he needs –

Commotion from below has the Kirishimas jolting to attention. Ikuya fades into the shadows while Natsuya climbs a rafter for a higher vantage point, crouched like a gargoyle and just as foreboding.

Ikuya peeks out of the darkness and digs his nails into the wall to grab hold of it. “I’m gonna sneak down there,” he whispers. “See how many wolves are here.”

“Be careful,” his brother responds with a firm look. “Don’t trip and let your blade impale you.”

“That was you that happened to, not me,” Ikuya scoffs before climbing down the wall.

Rin shakes his head to clear it and focuses his glare on the world below, clenching his fists to steel himself. There is a monarchy to impress and a statement to be made; he cannot let one oddly alluring person distract him.

Despite his best efforts, his gaze tracks the crowd to put a face to such a smell.

Sousuke leans against the wall by the warehouse’s entrance, his head ducked with a cap pulled low as he watches the last of the humans file in. Satomi props a leg up on the wall, lounging beside him. Their gazes sweep the array of mismatched tables across the wide space. Yazaki sits in the middle of the cluster since she’s the most inconspicuous of the pack with her shy mannerisms and default expression of kindness. She turns a few heads but that’s a good thing in this situation – these men think she’s nothing more than a pretty girl when in reality she could rip out their throats, and Satomi grins like she’s looking forward to the sight.

Makoto is at a table near Yazaki, making friends wherever he goes. Uozumi and Asahi sit together at one of the back tables with a few other guys. Uozumi plays the part of ignorant revolter well, but Asahi’s eyes are shifty and there’s sweat glistening at his temple. Werewolves don’t do well in crowds but when Sousuke sends Asahi a wave of comfort through the pack bond, he relaxes. He worried about bringing Uozumi since he’s got a pregnant mate back at the den, and Asahi has a mate to get home too as well, but he’s a damn good fighter.

The meeting starts but nobody speaking makes an impact in Sousuke’s mind; waves of foul discontentment churn in the air as they debate a plan of action against the mystics. From what Sousuke can tell, the group has no leader – everyone takes turns describing fearful encounters with fae or vampires, which Sousuke can’t really deem as lies. Mystics were never supposed to be part of society, so there’s bound to be bloodshed on both sides of the argument.

That thought makes him consider the humans’ standpoint up until they start praising the attack on the werewolf pups.

“Them dogs’ll retaliate,” a woman says and her husband puts an encouraging arm around her. His flannel shifts and Sousuke tenses at the man’s holster.

The woman rocks back and forth as she holds herself around the middle. “They’ll come for revenge; they don’t give a damn about their kids, not really.”
“That’s right,” another man says with an ardent nod and an educated accent. “They do not have the capacity to feel what we do for our children.”

Sousuke’s nostrils flare on an exhale of heat, a growl rising in his throat before Satomi nudges him into silence. Sousuke glances at Makoto, sending him a look of warning to leave and run for the hills until he’s out of earshot so he won’t hear the screams. Makoto’s mouth firms into a line but he stays, visibly in disagreement with Sousuke’s decision but choosing to stay and protect the pack.

Abruptly, a teenager stands up and he fumbles with the attention in the room. He lifts his chin even as he picks at his wrinkled hoodie. “My baby sister was in school with them pups.” He licks his lips but they tremble. “I don’t –” His voice cracks and he clears his throat. “She never said nothin’ about them being mean, or… or tryin’ to hurt her.”

“Thereir presence alone is enough to hurt her,” a woman barks, and the boy flinches. She walks up to him with clenched fists and Sousuke’s eyes dart to her thigh holster – it’s one of those ornate mock-designs of medieval fashion probably purchased from an online streampunk boutique, but her blade is real, and her gaze is full of hellfire on the boy.

She gets in his face and snaps, “Saying those little animals were done wrong is only an excuse for them to get close to us and make meals of our families, of my family.” She shoves him hard. “Who’s fucking side are you on?!?”

A few people startle from their seats but nobody walks over except Makoto. He puts a hand on the boy’s back before he can fall and gives the woman a silent look as he towers over her. She looks him up and down with disgust even as Sousuke smells her fear, and she sits back down with tightly crossed arms.

Makoto turns and arches a brow as everyone stares at him. With a calm blink, he regards those around the stage. Dread sinks into Sousuke and Makoto calls, “Do we have a plan of action against the werewolves?”

He’s met with nothing before a man barks up, his voice nowhere near as strong as he had probably intended. “We’ll – we’ll hunt them down. Find their den in the woods.”

Makoto lifts his brows with a knowing look. “Have we thought about the repercussions of committing genocide against an entire people?”

A few people glance at each other before ducking their eyes to the floor and Makoto lifts his chin. “The mystics have not committed mass murder – not the wolves, not the fae, not even the vampires.”

“That’s why we gotta stop it before it happens, boy,” a man hisses. He strides up to Makoto with confidence even though his clenched fists tremble. “Those mystics might not have done genocide yet, but they ain’t innocent. They kill people in this city every day – draining their blood, stealing corpse’s hair for potions.” He lifts his chin. “I’m a cop. I know. Those monsters ain’t meant to live among us.”

Sousuke agrees with that, at least.

The man points a finger into Makoto’s chest, though Makoto’s so tall it only reaches his stomach. The human snarls, “I’ll shoot them pups just as quick as I’ll shoot you right fuckin’ here for talkin’ that shit. Animals don’t feel. They ain’t real like us.”
Uozumi and Asahi straighten as they glance at Sousuke and he nods, casually slipping through the crowd before stopping dead in his tracks.

An odor swallows him and the rest of the pack, making them freeze as one – it smells like a grave left open to rot. Cold rust settles over his tongue.

He never focuses on the scent of flesh when he smells living things nearby, but there’s one creature that always radiates the scent of blood – not in the sense that they have an open wound, but that their blood doesn’t match their natural smell. It’s stolen blood that reanimates corpses.

Vampires.

Sousuke’s arm hair raises with a chill. Tension hardens his shoulders and he casts a subtle look at his pack to remain calm.

A jolt of anxiety comes from his bond with Yazaki when the vampires’ scent punches her in the gut. She isn’t even breathing, her eyes not moving away from a table across the floor.

Sousuke follows her gaze and his teeth snap together.

There, not two tables away from Yazaki, is a vampire – young in appearance but reeking of his true identity.

His eyes are piercing Yazaki and he knows exactly what she is. Are there more of them here? There has to be, Sousuke thinks. The stench is too strong for there to only be one scrawny vampire.

He arches a teal brow at Yazaki with a daring lift of his chin. Before Satomi can paint the warehouse red in defense of her mate, Yazaki’s features sharpen. She isn’t letting the vampire intimidate her despite that she’s never seen one, which is a pleasant surprise to Sousuke.

Just as the vampire scrapes his chair back, a shadow overtakes Yazaki. Asahi sits down beside her, not looking at all as intimidated as he feels through the pack bond, and he stares the little undead boy down.

The vampire scoffs but he resumes his seat, and Sousuke takes a breath. The vampire seems to be smarter than the ignorant confidence that he boasts. If a scuffle alerts the humans, there’s enough silver in here to kill all of them tonight. Maybe the vampire really is alone; he might have been willing to strike up a fight with Yazaki but he knew that he was no match for someone as big as Asahi.

Before Sousuke can feel relieved, the vampire calls, “Who is to say there are no werewolves here tonight?”

Everyone swivels around and Sousuke bristles. The vampire drinks in the tension with a smirk before giving a fickle sigh. “You knew that they hunger for revenge, so why would you plan a meeting so close to the forest?” His gaze sweeps the crowd in half-lidded patience, drawing out the pressure as his voice echoes. “They could be walking among you. Right now. You brought weapons – are you not prepared to use them?”

Whispers flood the crowd, making Sousuke’s skin crawl. He stays rigid as everyone glances at each other, some people tucking close to the wall when guns are drawn. Some escape to their
vehicles only to stagger back in with a haggard shout, “Our tires were slashed!”

Everyone swarms to their feet in an uproar. Accusations are screamed, people start shoving, and a woman staggers out of the fray to crash into Asahi’s chair. Dumbfounded, he puts a hand on her shoulder to straighten her, his eyes glazed over in a panic.

The blood explodes in Sousuke’s veins when a shot fires.

The crowd floods apart to reveal a man with his handgun raised to the ceiling, the chamber still smoking. He lowers the gun and barks, “Everyone shut up!”

He cocks his pistol and holds it steady as he marches through the silent crowd; they stumble out of his way and he gives each person a suspicious once-over. He sniffs the air, going rigid before he turns to Yazaki and Asahi.

Sousuke has no control as his wolf threatens to burst through his skin – an almighty shudder wracks his frame and just when his vision loses color, the man aims his gun to shoot a dozen rounds.

He doesn’t stop until the chamber is empty, until the woman standing beside Asahi has caught every bullet in her stomach.

Nausea punches Sousuke when she collapses, her fall echoing through the disbelieving quiet. She hits the floor and her skull cracks open like an egg as crimson oozes through her blond hair, staining it.

Yazaki gives the first jolt of movement in the crowd, lifting her trembling arms as blood rolls down her elbows. Asahi stares down at the woman, now a corpse – a single red tear drips down his chin as he looks up at the armed man.

The man wavers over the woman, blood clotting his beard. His shoulders heave with adrenaline and he snaps at the onlookers, “She was a werewolf, I’ve hunted the bastards before and I smelled it, goddamn it!”

Yazaki and Asahi look at each other as sickening realization dawns on their faces – the man had smelled werewolf on them, not the woman. She died in their place.

The man’s voice booms through the warehouse. “She was a wolf –”

“She wasn’t the only one~” the vampire sings. He meets Sousuke’s gaze, eyes crinkling with poisonous glee. “Don’t wolves travel in packs?”

Sousuke feels the physical sensation of something snap inside him. Heat flares off his skin as he lifts his chin, speaking over the frantic whispers of the crowd. “What about vampires?”

Every head swivels around while he shoulders through the crowd, fisting his pockets in the perfect image of nonchalance – though his gaze pierces the little vampire. “Corpses – ‘scuse me, vampires – like to pretend that they can hunt wolves.” He gives a mocking head-tilt. “Don’t vampires hate them?”

“Oh,” the corpse says, thick with hateful indulgence. He shakes with a rage that crests to an uncontrollable fever-pitch. “You have no idea.”
He flicks his gloved hand and a flash of white screams through the air. An inch from his forehead, Sousuke pinches the blade between two fingers. He inspects it in his gloved palm; it sits there for a few moments before he puts on a show of letting it clang to the ground. He smugly takes off his gloves.

He stands there, unscathed, and turns with the rest of the crowd to look at the vampire. He is *choking* on fury even as ash-grey fear washes over his skin. The crowd closes in with resolution and his expression is naked with vulnerability; he looks like a lost child as he stammers, “N-No, I’m not a – I’m not a fucking vampire, *get your hands off me*!”

Maybe the vampire really is smarter than Sousuke assumed – he knows to be afraid of humans.

Sousuke winces through a smile of false pity as a man loads a silver stake into his crossbow. “Sounds like something a vampire would say,” Sousuke sighs.

The quiver snaps and the stake carves through the air in a race toward the vampire’s heart. Just as victory brews in Sousuke’s chest, a flurry of robes catches his eye, billowing from above and descending as someone falls – no, *jumps* from the rafters. The figure welcomes the stake into his heart, catching it right in the chest with an echoing *squelch*.

The new vampire lurches to his knees and crumbles to the floor in a broken heap. Never in Sousuke’s hundreds of years on this planet has he heard grief like the little vampire’s scream. “*No, NATSUYA!*”

Sousuke hears a faint whistle before fire rips through his shoulder, nestling into his flesh as angry heat spreads through his body. He staggers with a hiss, spittle lashing from his mouth when he gropes his shoulder. Sousuke squeezes the dagger’s handle and silver melts through his palm; he gives a firm pull yet the blade is tucked too deeply between swollen muscles. His flesh begins to steam.

Sousuke puts all his strength into wrenching the dagger out, letting it clatter away. The dagger vibrates and he watches his blood soak into the silver, the blade drinking up his lifeforce.

With vile, Sousuke’s gaze jerks up to a silhouette perched on a beam high above, a figure carved with lean muscle that’s shaped by tight leather. The face is hidden but Sousuke makes out two burning garnets for eyes, and the figure’s tangible loathing is nothing in comparison to Sousuke’s onslaught of rage.

The crowd gapes at him and someone bellows, “*WOOLF!*”

Sousuke dives behind a table but a silver bullet rips down his bicep, flaying his skin open to spill the liquid fire of his blood. The catastrophe of noise pulses away and color drains from his vision, taking on a blurry film. His wolf races out of the core of himself, climbing to the surface of his skin before his limbs flail into four legs with claws bared. Humans stagger from the powerful winds of his change, and the shift is so abrupt that Sousuke hears the wet crack of a splitting ribcage before his bones lock back together.

His front legs hit the ground and all the fury in his heart escapes him in a roar that shatters every window, the force of it throwing tables and chairs as each door rips off its hinges.

A silver arrow drives through his hind leg and Sousuke startles a growl, his muzzle slinging foam
as his snout jerks to the side. His gaze pierces the man that shot him but before Sousuke can pounce, Uozumi and Asahi scramble over tables to lunge into the fray. They shift mid-air and when they crash to the ground, all that’s left of Sousuke’s attacker is screams and the hot stench of flesh.

A flash of honey catches Sousuke’s eye and Makoto slides over on four paws, using his teeth to rip the arrow from Sousuke’s leg. His effort is pointless because another one flies into Sousuke’s side, popping his stomach open like a balloon. Makoto whines in distress before Sousuke shoves him away to charge blindly, each shot fueling his vigor before he lunges into the fray with opened jaws.

His world becomes taste – copper, enough to drown in, so much of it that he must swallow it to continue his attack. His teeth peels scalps; his claws tear out eyes to leave them rolling across the floor like a child’s forgotten marbles. His last shred of consciousness knows that things have gone terribly wrong but his wolf is good for nothing if not retribution.

Weight crashes down and pins him to the floor. Drunk on agony, he tries to shove the person off only for them to sink their nails past his fur and squeeze into his flesh with inhuman strength. Sousuke’s eyes widen at the cold touch, tail bristling at the vampire’s growl.

The vampire squeezes into his throat, thighs vicing around Sousuke’s back. Sousuke thrashes and slams into the wall; the vampire spasms when his knee is crushed, hissing, “You fucking little –”

He’s determined – his legs tighten around Sousuke and his boots are spurred with points that sink into Sousuke’s gut so that he can’t fling him off.

The vampire leans down to brush his cold lips against Sousuke’s ear, and a smirk curls his breathless whisper. “I’m gonna kill you.”

The world stops as fangs sink into the back of Sousuke’s neck, two thick columns of porcelain that penetrate and violate his flesh. He bites right over Sousuke’s scruff where mother wolves carry pups with their teeth, and it paralyzes him, leaving him boneless and draining his will. Venom sears his veins and every molecule catches on fire, his very cells popping like bubbles. He wants his mother.

Blood squirts from his wound and the vampire stills, going so rigid that Sousuke wonders if he turned to stone on top of him. There’s a shift in the air as the vampire tightens around him so possessively that it’s like there’s emotion behind it.

His fangs squeeze deeper and Sousuke feels a pulling sensation internally, his veins swelling and contracting as the vampire sucks him.

Indignation roars through Sousuke. He throws himself to the ground and crushes the vampire, his yelp muffled under Sousuke’s weight. His fangs break loose, body trembling with a moan that sounds – well, it would sound sensual in any other situation.

Sousuke rolls off the vampire but one of his spurs is still caught in Sousuke’s stomach; he uses it to his advantage and flings the vampire across the floor, into the wall with a satisfying crash.

Sousuke wavers as he lifts his mighty head. The vampire looks incredibly small curled into himself and hugging his stomach. Sousuke stumbles over, dragging a red trail across the floor, then he hurdles into the vampire with reprisal hot in his blood.
A weak croak echoes through Sousuke’s head – “Serpens.”

The vampire vanishes and Sousuke collides with the wall, more embarrassed than hurt. He shakes himself and turns his head this way and that before his gaze slowly drops to the floor. In the vampire’s place is a ruby serpent coiled in a spiral, and the snake rears up with a hiss of long fangs. Sousuke lunges for it only for the viper to slither away into the wreckage.

Sousuke clambers onto the mountain of broken tables and noses through the wreckage only to give up with a huff. He blinks the blood from his eyes as he looks around – at some point during the chaos, the warehouse was set ablaze. Fire climbs the walls, swallowing bodies and pooling in the floor.

Sousuke grumbles and rears his head around to yank an arrow out with his teeth, body spasming in protest before his muscles relax and he grows warm from the healing process. He was lucky that every bullet ripped through him; he is not in the mood to get sawed open back at the den to try and excavate bullets.

He reaches through the bond, his vision draining grey as five streaks of light trail to each different wolf. His gaze follows each path to find Uozumi eating through a woman long dead, his instincts too afraid to let him believe that she will not harm him again. Yazaki’s tail is raw from fire as she crashes through overturned tables some men were using as a barrier; Satomi is with her and his sister’s fur is no longer white, but drenched red. Asahi breaks a crossbow in half with his teeth and one of his eyes is slashed shut, but Makoto took on the most damage out of the pack since he’d rather defend himself than hurt anyone.

Sousuke notices the little vampire holding the one that saved him; he rocks the man back and forth with senseless babblings of reassurance, oblivious to the fire around them.

Sousuke pushes down a faint sense of moral confliction and calls his wolves to flee; there’s no point in staying to build the mountain of bodies when the humans have already got the message – hopefully.

Just as his chest swells to howl, fingers yank him back by the ear and an arm hurdles around to punch him straight in the fucking face.

Sousuke’s head snaps back in a spray of blood, pain leaving him blind for the flash of a second. He lurches around to sink his teeth in the meat of the vampire’s arm and a shout wrenches from his core, not a human sound – it is the pleading cry of a monster, and Sousuke feels nothing but satisfied.

He wrenches the vampire to the ground and lies on top of him to pin him; the vampire spasms, his breath abandoning him in a broken rasp. One of the last humans fires a shot into Sousuke’s gut before Satomi literally rips her face off, but Sousuke doesn’t care about the pain. He’s going to end this – drag this fucking corpse straight down to hell with him so that they may carry on the age-old feud for eternity.

Sousuke snarls, cramming a paw against the vampire’s throat and relishing in the gulp he lets out. He smells his own fucking blood on the vampire’s lips – it’s painted all over his mouth down to his neck. Sousuke hovers over his face with hot foam dripping from his muzzle and leans down with opened jaws before locking eyes with the vampire.

The crackling flames dull into silence like a gust of wind that would leave Sousuke lost in
darkness. The pack bond slips away and his mind becomes hollow with quiet. Colors, sounds, tastes… pain. Gone quicker than the next heartbeat, so abruptly that Sousuke cannot remember any other name or sensation before this moment.

His entire world narrows down into the eyes staring up at him, which mirror Sousuke’s blank look of confusion. He finds himself drinking in the details: the eyes glow red like blessed gems; there’s stray blood spiking the vampire’s lashes and brimming his waterlines, pooling at the corners. Firelight softens his features; his maroon hair is splayed across his forehead with grime, and he looks as lost as Sousuke feels.

Sousuke cannot even name what – who he is looking at. The word vampire is so distant in his mind yet he knows that this boy is not human.

But Sousuke’s wolf knows exactly who this boy is.

Mate.

Mate, his soul whispers, mate, mate, mate, sings his heart, he’s your mate, calls his brain – his lungs swell with the mantra, teeth and claws pulsing hot with it.

His mate’s eyes dart and he goes rigid when he feels it, oh, he knows it. Sousuke can tell from his gasp, and Sousuke hears the echoes of it in his bones like a jolt of electricity from miles and miles of powerlines – a white crackle dancing across a lonely forest.

The vampire shoves him off and Sousuke lets him, curling into himself with the burn of rejection. He lowers to the ground with a whine that makes each wolf prick their ears up, but Sousuke is oblivious to the horror of realization that dawns in the bond. All he can do is watch the vampire scramble backwards, cradling his mangled arm that Sousuke almost ripped off. He hates himself for it.

The vampire never breaks their stare, so he does not notice the shadow that overtakes him – it’s a man dragging his broken leg, and he’s missing his arm all the way up to the underside of his jaw. The man wills his last bit of strength to raising a silver stake over the vampire’s head.

Sousuke lunges and slides over the vampire, eyes clenching shut when the stake crashes between two vertebrae; it pushes a cry out of Sousuke, broken with defeat as his body reaches the threshold of pain that he can endure.

The vampire stares in naked disbelief before the first twitch of emotion crosses his features.

The doors explode apart, throwing humans to the ground before the doors fly across the warehouse to slice through the walls. Leaves spiral as the breeze carries a stench to Sousuke and his stomach drops.

Silhouettes walk into the firelight with an air of regal authority, no falter in their gaits while they drink in the chaos. The flames don’t glow right against their stone skin and their eyes burn while the rest of their bodies are slated in dull pigments – but their robes are hardly modest. Capes trail the ground and gloves of rich embroidery clutch ornate daggers. There’s a girl with a high ponytail and she wields a double-headed spear, a tiger’s head resting on one shoulder of her armor; only one boy is dressed in dark modesty, his outfit built for agility, and his blue eyes surge.

The Vampire King stands at the front and his gaze sweeps the wreckage in grim disappoint before
his eyes land on Sousuke and the boy underneath him. The king’s eyes roam to the dagger in Sousuke’s back, the man standing over them, and realization dawns on his face with an array of other emotions – violation, sickness, confusion. A misplaced sense of gratitude that his pride will not let him voice.

The blue-eyed vampire flicks his wrist and a blade flies into the man’s throat – he grabs at his neck with a garbled sound before collapsing to his knees, and motion rushes the warehouse. Sousuke tells his wolves go, run, leave me, before someone’s teeth rips the dagger from his back and they bite down on Sousuke’s scruff. He lets himself be wrenched away; his wolves flank him before shoving him through a hole in the wall so that they can escape through the fields.

Sousuke dares to look back. The vampire is up on his knees and staring after Sousuke as he cradles his limp forearm with the other, his eyes wide and lost.

Chapter End Notes

up next: the aftermath. lotta feels.

chapter notes:

so obviously sousuke took a lot of damage and silver of course hurts werewolves, but as the alpha, it takes a lot of it to actually kill him - getting that stake in the back ensued the most damage since it’s thicker than an arrowhead and none of those bullets stayed inside of him.

and remember with vampires, one stake to the heart will not kill them - they have to be beheaded and burned in that order, as rin states in the beginning of the chapter.

i hope you enjoyed! thank you for reading.

twitter & curious cat
Chapter Summary

No amount of guilt could ever force Sousuke to abandon this table. He lies on his back with his palms opened in submission as his mate appraises the meat of him.

“You’ve got an ocean inside of you,” the vampire whispers with misplaced reverence. "I see it moving."

He means Sousuke's blood.

Chapter Notes

happy beginning of spring, thank you for your patience. <3 i truly hope you enjoy, i missed this universe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Sousuke is trapped in a shack with no windows, only a naked bulb swinging overhead like a backwards clockhand._

_Wind razors through the planks, scraping in the chill of winter’s storm. It is a moonless night, the_
time in which he is the most vulnerable without nature’s guidance.

He lies on a table but is not bound because the vampire knows that Sousuke could never lift a hand to him – he wears the knowledge mockingly in his expression. The vampire saunters around the table with lifted chin, dragging a black claw across the wood and flaying it as he goes.

Sousuke would be a fool to deny that the vampire is goddamn gorgeous: his wealth of crystal flesh is not modest, for his night robe is askew, falling off rounded shoulder. His skin is like snow invaded the room, and it is marble; his chest is defined accordingly. The vampire court’s insignia spreads across his pecs, and Sousuke wonders if it hurt when the ink was burned into the vampire’s muscle. Sousuke hopes that it didn’t bring his vampire pain; he frets over the thought with dread, and no small sense of self-loathing.

But no guilt could ever force Sousuke to abandon this table. He lies on his back with his palms opened in submission as his mate appraises the meat of him.

“You’ve got an ocean inside of you,” the vampire whispers with misplaced reverence. His hand snakes up Sousuke’s tunic, mapping to the right side of his chest. “I see it moving.”

He means his blood. Sousuke contemplates if the vampire sees the entire world through a red palette, where crimson saturates depending on how much blood is near. Can the vampire even see all the colors of Sousuke? Does he know what shade his eyes are? Has the vampire ever dreamed of them?

Sousuke waits so pliantly, his very demeanor beckoning his most beloved nearer. The vampire obeys what Sousuke’s gaze begs, and he slides up onto the table with liquid grace, but he does not straddle Sousuke with amorous intention.

He’s holding him down so that Sousuke cannot run.

Sousuke would not dream of it, not ever, and his expression conveys this passion. The vampire looks endeared for all the wrong reasons. “Your heart controls you.” He leans over Sousuke’s chest, hands braced on either side of him. Long hair slides from behind his ears, tickling the highest point of Sousuke’s cheeks.

The faint contact pours crackling stars across his skin and excitement kicks in his pulse, though Sousuke cannot help but feel a primitive sense of disturbance at how cold the vampire is. He knew that vampires were cold to the touch, but his mate wears a radiating chill of death.

Sousuke dares a whisper in the intimate quiet between them. “Is that such an unforgivable thing? To be guided by one’s heart?”

The vampire’s eyes are icy metallic, flashing as they dart. He inhales and they glow in neon pulses of rose. “Your heart’s natural task is to drink blood.” Lead drops into Sousuke’s gut as the vampire runs his nose down across his throat. “It drinks your blood and sends it elsewhere in the body. It bleeds.”

Sousuke’s eyes are forced shut by the weight of pleasure that binds him underneath the vampire. “Would that not mean you are still natural? If your behavior only mimics that of a heart?”

The vampire sits back on his haunches, silhouette draping Sousuke in frigid darkness. The vampire’s shadow drains all the air from the world, and it feels neglecting.
He shoves Sousuke’s tunic up over his pecs and it reminds Sousuke of skinning an animal; the vampire is peeling back layers to find the warmth of Sousuke’s core like it calls to him.

The vampire’s fingers sink through Sousuke’s flesh, burying in the buttery tissue as if it is nothing but soil for the vampire’s fingers to be planted. Bruises bloom just for him and Sousuke does not scream; he is so relieved to be touched that the pain is meaningless.

His mate flays Sousuke’s skin to pry his ribcage apart, creating wings of bone that jut upright from his opened chest. He rakes through flesh to follow the song of Sousuke’s pulse to his heart, and when he finds it, the vampire purrs.

The walls shake. The light bulb above spins faster, and the storm outside wails like witches dancing around a fire.

The vampire cups Sousuke’s heart in both hands before raising it from his chest. Blood vessels snap; ligaments shred and tissue pops, leaving the vampire crying wine as sprayed blood drips off his chin. Sousuke watches the organ convulse and it’s still red with life, quivering like it’s afraid.

The vampire cradles Sousuke’s heart and inhales against it. His eyes roll back and he laughs, “You should never trust anything that drinks blood.”

When he opens his mouth against Sousuke’s heart and squeezes his fangs into it, the vampire moans.

Sousuke jolts awake with a scream climbing his throat.

His forest is humid from the summer night, but as he pants, frost spills out. With wide eyes, he watches it billow from his mouth before fading, and Sousuke shakes with delusions, frantic to ground himself in what is hopefully reality. He cups the side of his throat to find his scent glands oily. His body radiates the aroma of winter – pine, snowy berries, everything that makes such an unforgiving season romantic.

He fell asleep at the mouth of the healer’s den, hears the muffled crackling from the fire within. Cricket chirps flare, and there’s a rumble of sleeping dragons like distant thunder. He hears the disturbing echo of changeling giggles, deep in the trees. The comforting aroma of pack washes over him: fur sheddings, sweat, and broiled flesh from cooking fires.

At that, Sousuke’s hand flies to his chest. It has not been pried open, but he still feels the creep of fingernails somewhere on him.

Sousuke exhales, hiking his knees up to prop his elbows on them. Nausea rolls through his insides. Disgust and shame bring the pressure of crying behind his eyes. The dream haunts his consciousness before a name stirs in his mind.

His eyes slide open in disbelief, and a precious whisper falls out of him without control. “Rin.”

He stares out at his trees, which are desolate in their lonely sleep of splendor – the sight cannot touch his heart. Sousuke feels like there’s a fire in his chest, burning only to hurt him.

He leans back on his palms and grimaces when his back cracks; gauze constricts his waist and the fabric is itchy-damp with dried blood. He might be pack alpha, but he took that silver blade deep
between two vertebrae back at the warehouse, and he refuses to take the proper rest needed for fast healing. He must watch over his wolves in this cave – they are no longer screaming, but the sound will haunt him forever. Guilt nails down his spine.

Sousuke palms his shoulder and heat flares all the way to his fingertips, making them throb. The healers poured sprite tears over the wound – the tears fertilize the woodlands, enchanting every leaf and speck of dirt, and the liquid often helps werewolves heal quicker. However, Sousuke’s shoulder is taking too long to right itself. He cannot understand why.

He pulls the dagger from his tunic, recalling when the vampire – Rin – launched it at him. He spins the weapon to watch it flicker in the starlight. It’s black metal and obviously enchanted by the odd rune carved into the handle. The script was done hastily, scribbled in a panic, and Sousuke does not recognize the rune.

Footsteps come as his mother breaches the hill, and Sousuke slips the dagger back into his pocket. Kaori sits beside him in the dirt, touching his hand without meeting his gaze. Her voice is harsh with tears. “You’re needed at the elder’s hut.”

Sousuke exhales in a sigh as a headache throbs to life. “I’m not in the mood to be damned.”

Kaori faces him, her beaded braid chiming as it rolls off her shoulder. He doesn’t look at her, though he can imagine her disbelief. And her defeat.

Kaori gazes at the valley down the hill in which they sit. The grass dances lazily, and they watch rabbits scurry through the valley; sprites flutter out of the way to hide in the sky like pink stars. Sousuke braces himself and asks, “What are the elders saying?”

When she doesn’t respond, Sousuke faces her. Kaori’s jaw slates like a chain, pulling taut as she gazes at the elders’ hut. Her tone is not surprised, though it is most certainly not emotionless. “They are preparing for sawtooth most gleefully.”

Ice rakes across Sousuke’s skin. The ritual of sawtooth is only preformed when the pack alpha is no longer fit to lead – the elders are the only ones that can reach this decision, and they will order Sousuke’s pack to each take a swipe at him. They can bite him, they may burn what parts of him they please, and Sousuke cannot fight back. Once he is on the brink of death, the elders will command Satomi to perform the fatal blow, and she will become their new alpha.

“Satomi won’t do it,” Kaori says. “The elders know this. She will lay down beside you and she will be just as pliant in allowing the pack to eat her.” She lifts her chin bitterly. “I will lose both of my children by sunrise if this bond is not severed.”

Sousuke’s brows knit. “The pack won’t do it, either. They’re scared and confused, but they won’t perform sawtooth.” He twists his knuckle against his temple. “They feel what I do, they know I don’t understand this either.”

“I didn’t say that the pack would perform sawtooth, I said that the elders will order them to.” She rolls her neck, exposing her unmarked throat.

Sousuke slumps. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry about all of this, mother.”

Morning humidity settles over Kaori’s face and arms; dew-drop tears glisten on her fur vest. “You did not fail me.” She whispers it though there is no one else listening but the trees. She flattens a
palm over Sousuke’s chest to find the war drum of his heart, and her features sink in frustration. “If only you had known… I know that you would have embraced death before you ever locked eyes with that vampire.” She spits the term with violated indignation.

If Sousuke’s own mother is this upset, he cannot imagine how betrayed his pack feels. He cannot plead for their forgiveness – he disgraced his family to an unforgivable measure, all because his soul is no longer his own. He would have no choice if the vampire asked something of him, anything.

Rin.

“It must be a spell,” Kaori snarls, shaking her head in building fury. “It’s not a bond, it can’t be. You didn’t mark him.”

Sousuke’s mouth runs dry. “I didn’t –” He’s faint. “I didn’t mean to.”

“You bit his arm before you met his eyes, and he chewed into your scruff before that as well. It’s not real, this isn’t –” It seems like even Kaori knows how desperate she sounds. The alpha woman shakes with gritted jaw. “Goddamn it. Goddamn it all, baby, I’m so sorry.”

Her emotional falter surprises him and he’s frozen when she licks her palm to flake away the dried blood on his scruff. He bows in a stupor, letting her scrub at the back of his neck. She scoots over onto her knees behind him to work better, sniffing. “My sweet pup.” He tastes the salt of her tears in the air, bitter and humid. She suddenly laughs to herself and her voice warms. “I remember giving you haircuts when you were just a boy. I’d sit you down just like this; you squirmed and kicked me and wailed like the world was ending.”

A sheepish blush takes his face. “Sorry.”

He can hear the grin to her words. “I remember giving you baths as a baby, too. Pudgy little thing.”

“Stop,” he whines, making her only laugh harder. She rustles his hair before kissing him there.

Kaori rubs her palm over his scruff, rubbing warmth into it, then she bows her forehead against his hair. “I won’t let them destroy you for this.” She hugs him from behind.

His throat swells as her arms close around him, and she rocks him back and forth. He looks to the stars hopelessly. “Can I say that I’m scared?”

She sighs. “Not to anyone else but me, I’m afraid.”

He laughs too because he doesn’t know what else to do. “That’s okay.”

Kaori rises and fans her mane of hair out before hauling Sousuke to his feet. “Go to Asahi’s faerie,” she orders with hushed urgency. The sunrise saturates her eyes as she casts her gaze to the elder’s hut. “I will hold off their questions. I will give you time.”

Sousuke shakes his head in confusion. “Why, what –”

“She is masters of the mind.” She gestures to her head. “Delusions, suggestion.” She ushers him to the tree line. “If they can transform humans into living corpses, there’s no reason why they cannot sever a bond.”
Sousuke wrenches from her hold, staggering backwards. Sprites flutter to dodge his steps, spiraling away like glowing dandelion seeds. “Mother.” She shakes her head in frantic confusion and his mouth firms. His fist closes over his heart. “If this is what I think it is, you know what will happen if it’s severed. What will happen to me.”

Kaori gasps, blinking dazedly. She quickly wipes her eyes and reaches out to cup his face, stretching her arms all the way up. “Pack alphas are the only ones of our kind that can form a bond so powerful. Their wolves are so wise that they can find their mate just by looking at them; they see what the eyes do not. It has not happened for generations.” She almost smiles to herself. “It was called *ikigai* in the old days – a reason for being.”

She runs a thumb over Sousuke’s forehead, tracing an oval. “Your wolf rests right here, sleeping.” Her palm flattens against his heart. “But this is you. And you did not choose this vampire. Your wolf would not betray you, betray pack.”

Sousuke flinches and Kaori’s hands slide away. She nods firmly to herself. “Go to the faerie. He will rid you of this conflict.”

“And if he can’t?”

His mother’s smile is emotionless. “A mother takes care of her pups.” She says no more.

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*For* vampires, entire decades pass in a blur – live long enough and you begin seeing the same people in different faces. Wars are fought for different reasons but they’re all the same, essentially. The sun rises the same as it always has, the moon cycles and narrows and grows like it always will.

Rin wishes that time would pass by in a brilliant flash, but he knows it won’t. Not anymore.

He yearns for time to spin faster but he’s forced to take in the sickening details as the stealth party is tended to in the court’s medicine bay. The castle itself is underground and spans the entirety of the city sewers, but many wings were built upward in order to save space. The medicine bay is a narrow tower that spirals into a cone opening at the top, allowing the torches to breathe. It is a dreary place with a caged fire pit at the bottom and ledges climb the structure with individual patients treated on each level.

Stone planks stretch from one side of the tower to the other, and they carry hanging baskets of supplies. Angels or winged familiars are needed in order to reach the baskets, so Nitori and Ayumu flutter around with bats and albino vultures, hurrying to bring doctors what they request.

Rin is so numb with shock that he doesn’t even flinch when his shoulder gets yanked back into place; he hears Ikuya’s exhausted sobs and the desperate slurps Natsuya drinks from Nao’s wrist. Black blood overflows his mouth, nearly crystalized from Nao’s icy veins. It surely tastes foul, but a mate’s blood is a cure-all and overall comfort. Not to mention Nao is Natsuya’s creator, and the venom in his blood will help Natsuya more than anything else.

Natsuya took a stake to the chest but he’s alive, though unrecognizable. His thighs hang open, one calf falling off the side of the gurney, and he is slumped with unimaginable weakness.

Blood overflows Natsuya’s mouth, flooding down his chin to pool in the hollow of his throat like a little black lake. Nao wavers from the chair beside his mate, features drawn taut to keep the pain
from his expression, but he shakes with it. Natsuya is lost to blood fever – his instincts demand that he drinks as much as possible to keep himself alive, and he doesn’t have the coherency to worry about hurting Nao right now.

Rin expects a fight when Nao pulls his wrist away. Natsuya claws for it again with poised fangs and wails like an animal, partly because he wants blood, but also because he needs his mate close. It’s a fearful noise.

Ikuya’s whole arm trembles when he offers it to his brother and Natsuya is not careful – he chews into Ikuya’s arm before his fangs lock, and prying him off will be a heartbreaking ordeal. Ikuya’s blood won’t be as appetizing to Natsuya as much as Nao’s was, but Natsuya is Ikuya’s creator and his instincts will remember the taste. That will soothe him to a degree.

Rin, however, is inconsolable. He sits very literally in his father’s shadow as Toraichi stands over him, watching one of their doctors turn Rin’s forearm over. His father makes a disgruntled noise at the sight.

The werewolf mauled Rin’s forearm; vampires have skin like granite but once it’s shredded, the repairs are malicious. The doctor sighs, pouring up a concoction of water, castile soap, as well as oils from grapefruit and basil. She dips a rag into the mixture before sweeping it across Rin’s arm. “We can get rid of these clawmarks,” she soothes. The doctor finds the appropriate acrylic adhesive to match his skin tone, then runs it into all his fissures.

Toraichi’s expression shadows with dread. “And what of the bite?”

The doctor keeps her eyes firm on her work. “Look what it’s doing.” She hovers a finger over the teeth marks. “It only scarred over so quickly because the mark is sealing the werewolf’s saliva beneath the prince’s skin.”

Rin already knew that – he can smell it with nauseating potency: honey.

Toraichi demands, “Why?”

The doctor just gives him a look because they all know why. The alpha imprinted on Rin, and he bit him to seal the bond. Rin bit the werewolf too, on his scruff. He damned himself right then and there, but even so, Rin cannot forget the taste of that blood. Even now, through all the chaos, he has never felt so full on satisfaction.

Toraichi drags both hands through his hair. It’s a disheveled mess that reeks of ash from the warehouse. He braces his hands on his hips as his voice cracks. “Surely, there must be something we can do —”

“Cut it off,” Rin whispers, eyes unblinking on the ceiling. “Just cut my arm off.”

His father rushes to crouch by his gurney. “No, Rin,” he hushes, sweeping a hand over Rin’s forehead. “We won’t do such a thing. You’ve done nothing to deserve such.” Toraichi falters and bows his head for a moment. “Masae, this is my son. You understand there is absolutely nothing I won’t do to rid him of this.”

“Yes, your grace, I have no doubts.”

“Tell me what can be done.” His implication weighs the air down.
Masae hesitates. “My king, if this is what I believe it is, killing the alpha will only bring your son the same fate.”

“Then what can be done to break this – this curse.” He wrenches the fabric of Rin’s shirt, over his heart. Rin just lies there, letting himself be jostled. “My son was violated, this is no union. Rin is the victim in this.”

She bows her head. “If we are deciding to treat this as a curse, I would suggest that we ask Haru what our next plan of action should be.”

Hope sparks in Rin’s chest and he sits up, wincing as soreness courses through him. “You think he can do something about this?”

Masae lifts her brows carefully. “I am not implying anything, but at the very least, Haru might be able to bring you some comfort when the pain starts.”

His stomach drops. “What pain?”

Toraichi closes a hand over his mouth, scrubbing and uncomfortable. “She means that if this is a real bond, you’ll…” He gestures outward from his chest. “Start to feel the distance between you and –” He can’t even bring himself to say it. Toraichi shakes himself and once Rin’s wound is dressed, he helps his son limp out of the med bay. “There is no reason to cast worries on the future when we cannot confirm or deny anything at this point.”

Rin steps out into the gloomy hallway with him, guided by his father’s comforting hand on his back. Rin cradles his dressed forearm and drags his feet miserably before his father asks, "Are you thirsty?"

Rin blushes and looks away. "No." Not at all.

The king glances at his stained clothes but offers no reply.

Rin can’t take this silence. “Why aren’t you yelling at me?” He misses the normalcy of it.

Toraichi sighs as he rubs Rin’s back, and his smile hangs low on his face, sympathetic. “I believe your circumstances are enough punishment.” He jostles Rin’s shoulder a bit. “I expect this predicament is making you regret your choices, but I hope that you understand why the decision to go hunting was wrong.”

Natsuya’s echoing cries are muffled with distance, but they still make Rin shudder. “I put people in danger.”

Toraichi inclines his head, pleased. “You did.”

“But I didn’t even want anyone to go with me.” He rounds to stop his father in his tracks, pleading desperately. “I wanted to do this on my own and prove that I could handle it.”

Toraichi lifts his chin, parting his lips before they close into a line, and he mulls over what to say. It looks like he’s trying very hard not to sound mean. “And you think that you would have fared better, if you were alone?”
Rin grits his teeth to prevent the swell of tears behind his eyes, but he can’t find another rebuttal. He just bows his head, sniffing. Never in his existence has he felt so ashamed, craving to disappear from everyone’s memory. “I failed everyone. I failed you.”

Toraichi sighs and gathers Rin up in his arms – his father’s robes smell like fire, but his blood is apples, familiar. “You made a foolish mistake.” Rin flinches and hides deeper in the embrace. “But it was an understandable one. Wanting to prove yourself is hardly damnable, Rin. Your way of doing it was just careless.” His father chuckles and strokes his hair. “You get that from me – all or nothing.”

Toraichi pulls back, bracing his hands on Rin’s shoulders. “Natsuya will recover and so will you, somehow. For now, go talk to Haru. He’s your friend and that alone is a solace, even if he doesn’t have an answer about this…” His eyes flicker to Rin’s arm. “Situation.”

Once Rin has ventured into deeper tunnels, Toraichi sags against the wall. He tips his head back with stress working in his temples, and he heads off to find comfort of his own.

Toraichi’s feet pull him to the library and dust swirls when he hauls the doors apart. A wealth of space greets him, and he is hushed with awe in the presence of so much ancient literature. The library has iron chandeliers larger than transfer trucks, and they spin around with echoing groans; their candles alone span the length of a man. Banners run vertical down the walls and they bear the Matsuoka crest. It was painted in the era of Romanticism, when the palettes were dark and bold – gruesome, but fascinating in their disturbance. This was also the time period in which animal portraits gained popularity, though the Matsuoka crest is not a white tiger for the sake of trends.

A golden banner is plated above the shield and reads mors mihi lucrum. Death to me is a reward.

One topic most vampires agree upon is that the initial change is traumatic. Feeling your heart stop beating even as your eyes open is a betrayal of nature itself. The change is emotionally devastating despite that all of time is now laid out at your feet. The fear of one’s new self has left many a vampire frozen before a mob, leaving them to be tortured – and feeling like they deserve it.

Seizing your new identity is the only way to survive as an immortal in Toraichi’s eyes. The royal crest is their way of life: as the walking dead, they demand victory over themselves and their enemies, and they have never taken no for an answer.

Toraichi hopes that this werewolf has not forced Rin to take on yet another new identity. It would change everything in ways that they have never prepared for –

Well, nobody need mind that. Rin’s life was already stolen from him once, and as his father, Toraichi has every right to make sure that does not happen again.

He follows the noise of shuffling books to the interior balcony. All the passion held together by a single book spine – it’s always bewitched Toraichi. He still holds a childlike wonder for this library, and he is convinced that reading all these books would give someone the knowledge of a god: they would learn firsthand accounts on the grievances of mankind and see the poetry of it all.

Toraichi fancied himself a poet many moons ago, though he had no desire to write about the experiences of a vampire. He couldn’t find inspiration to describe the towns he’s lived in, how their architecture evolved or how it crumbled. Really, he could only write about his family, and he sang
their praises with a quill and joy in his heart.

Even now, the words come to him so easily when he sees his family – Miyako in particular. She sits at one of a dozen tables scattered about the library’s second floor, scrolls unraveled in the flickering torches. She’s been a mess ever since Haru woke Toraichi to confess Rin’s whereabouts, and she sits in her silken night robe, barefoot and haggard as she slumps over yet another book of supernatural history.

_The fabric of your flesh_, Toraichi thinks at the sight of her. _Pure as a wedding dress._

“Find anything, love?” he says by way of greeting, standing behind her to comb her hair back.

Miyako sighs in appreciation, leaning into his affectionate touches. “Not a thing.” She reaches up to stroke Toraichi’s wrist absentely, her eyes glowing dull with exhaustion. “I suppose we should not have expected to find a plethora of information about werewolves in a vampire library.”

He laughs and kisses the top of her head before sitting beside her. He cradles one of her hands in both of his. “This only happened hours ago. We cannot expect all the answers at once.”

She gives him a look but doesn’t speak on it.

There’s a rumble from beneath the table, and the grand stir of motion causes the very air to rise. Toraichi peeks under the table with a grin. “Well, good evening, Steve.”

The white tiger slinks out and bows into a stretch, tail curling. He yawns, opening his jaws with endless rows of teeth. Steve shakes out his fur with a satisfied shudder, then he lazily flops his head in Miyako’s lap.

He is an ethereal creature of grace and power in equal measure – the tiger is also the most flawlessly groomed creature you could ever meet, not to mention the most spoiled. He’s getting rather fat, but Toraichi will _not_ be the person to tell him such.

Miyako loves that tiger like one of her children, always has since she and Toraichi fell in love as circus performers. Humans. Those were such grim yet colorful times, but thankfully, their kids only recall the excitement of living from stage to stage.

Miyako plays with Toraichi’s fingers. “How is he?” Her voice is hushed with fear for their son.

The memory of Rin’s frantic eyes makes his chest ache. “Rin is… frustrated, and rightfully terrified, but he seems more ashamed than anything else.”

She pulls her drape of red embroidery around herself – the threading splits like rose thorns across the silk. “I would say that you were too easy on him, but…” She squeezes his hand in apology. “I agree that this predicament might have finally taught him a lesson.”

Toraichi tries to smile. “You always say that I’m not hard enough on him.”

“Neither of us are,” she concedes, rubbing Steve’s ears. The beast purrs with such intensity that the books rustle on the table. “But we must stop feeling guilty about the circumstances which brought him to vampirism. It’s not fair to Gou.”

Toraichi sobers up, bowing his head. “Yes, you’re right.” He rolls his eyes with humor. “Suppose I
need to give that little demoness proper entry into the castle? To make it up to Gou?"

Miyako nods. “They’re never careful when Isuzu sneaks in. I’m not a good liar, Gou’s about to
realize that I’m faking a smile whenever she announces she’s ‘retiring early to her chambers’.”

“Never once has she spoken more eloquently,” Toraichi chuckles. He kisses her wrist, holding his
lips there as he thinks. “I have to fix this, Miyako. I know we placate Rin too often, but I truly
don’t think he can handle this. None of us can.” He kneads his brow with a sigh. “So here we are.
*Like wild beasts living without a future.*” He works his jaw, voice falling to a bitter whisper. “*Fear
and flee the wolf.*”

Miyako smiles sadly. “I wasn’t aware you still read Carter.”

“Oh, I never stopped,” he professes with a hand over his heart.

She chuckles and cups his face, running her thumbs across his cheeks. “You became a king to help
your people. I have every faith that you’ll find exactly when Rin needs.” Her gaze drifts in thought
as her voice hardens. “But I am going to make that werewolf eat his own balls.”

Toraichi blinks, flushing. He clears his throat. “ Might you require an audience?”

She slaps his chest and laughs. Miyako props her feet up in Toraichi’s lap and picks up her
gauntlet most gracefully. “All of this on top of the uprising. You’re sure there were no humans left
alive at the warehouse?”

“Positive. The media will claim it was a simply a gathering of excitement that went wrong.”

She lifts her brows, taking a sip. “I don’t think they will use those words exactly, but hopefully,
they’ll say something to that effect.”

Toraichi lowers her ankles to the floor. “Come, let’s get you back to bed. You’re exhausted.”

“No, I won’t.” She shakes her head firmly. “I can’t sleep while everyone else is running about so
tormented. I’ll go sit with Nao.”

He smiles as she tangles their fingers. “You’re a good queen.” She’s always been Toraichi’s queen,
even before they were vampires – even when they had nothing but each other.

Miyako kisses the back of his hand. “And you’re a good father.”

The moonlight drops, cold and glittering, between the trees; it reveals Sousuke’s outline as he treks
through the profound stillness of 3 AM. The woodlands are soaked with dew and mist smothers
the lakes, all the rivers. The fae’s islands jut from the distant water like black knives, and all is
quiet while the forest waits for the sun.

The silence disorients Sousuke, pulling a shudder to his skin as he throws a paranoid look over his
shoulder. He wraps his arms around himself, twitching at the sudden kiss of wind that runs down
his back. The trees don’t rustle with it; the fallen leaves do not stir. The atmosphere feels like a
memory – his nightmare, carried over from paralyzed unconsciousness. He feels so cold.

A sound introduces itself with cunning softness. He listens in vain, not able to focus on anything
but the wardrum of his blood. In his peripheral, a shadow flies through the trees only to disappear when Sousuke faces it.

A distressing stench creeps down his throat.

Sousuke reaches the hill where Kisumi’s cottage sits and the sound comes overhead, rather than ground-level of the valley in which he stands. A silhouette creeps into a zone of uncertain light, and it halts, staring at Sousuke. He cannot find the creature’s eyes, but nothing has ever frozen him to the core like this.

Does he recognize the shape of this person? Something inside of Sousuke does. His wolf stirs to life even as his heart falls in hopeless dread.

The individual prowls down the hill with spasmodic motions like it’s guided by wires. Darkness gathers overhead at a terrifying speed. The person steps into the glare of moonlight and that’s when Sousuke lets out a wild cry.

The wendigo launches from the top of the hill with a shriek that could peel tree bark. Sousuke is dumb and motionless before he kicks to life, staggering backwards only to fall on his ass. He shouts against the impact, back spasming as wounds floods open. His exhaustion will not allow immediate action, and all he can do is watch the wendigo pounce.

The jump is forever – too long to be real. The wendigo outstretches its claws and Sousuke squeezes his eyes shut to brace himself.

There’s a metallic clang and the wendigo snaps backward.

Sousuke’s eyes flutter open to register the collar around the wendigo’s neck, and his gaze follows the chain back up to a post at the top of the hill. The aroma of decaying flowers guides his eyes to Kisumi, and the faerie stands by the post with his brows lifted into a dry expression. “Happy Witching Hour.” His wings bat in languid pulses, enveloping him in a lavender aura.

Sousuke pants, arms trembling as he pushes out of the dirt. He cups his shoulder, rolls it, and it throbs against his palm; his whole right arm has no strength. He groans, back rigid as concrete, and Sousuke stands on wobbly legs before Kisumi tugs the chain. The wendigo yowls, smashing its hands against the earth like a perturbed child.

That’s when Sousuke realizes how little this wendigo is – he could pick her up. She barely reaches his knee. The corpse has greasy braids and stubby horns, though she looks just as sickly and terrible as a full-grown wendigo. Her grey skin is oiled, bubbly, and tufts of grisly hair hang from her snout.

Sousuke wavers as he climbs the hill, giving the wendigo a hilariously wide berth. “They can reproduce?”

Kisumi bends down to a dog house tucked between two of his rose bushes. “Guess even the morbid and decaying like a little fun.”

“They have sexes?”

Kisumi blinks. “Well, they did before they became wendigos, so.” He situates some blankets in the dog house before ushering the little wendigo back inside. She groans and clamors in, circling
around to find the most comfortable spot.

Kisumi goes over to a cauldron burning on the other side of the yard and he rolls up his translucent sleeves – the stitching glitters in the firelight, patterned like bark. “Found her yesterday. Usually, the mothers eat their babies – nothing’s really off limits when you’re damned with eternal hunger.”

Sousuke droops. “That’s so sad.” Granted, natural wolves eat their pups if the pack is starving, but Sousuke would offer his limbs up one by one if such a crisis emerged.

Kisumi raises his arms, using magic to levitate a deer’s hind leg from the cauldron. “I found her all by herself. Seems like her mother fled so she wouldn’t eat her.” He slings the leg into the dog house. “I felt bad for her.”

Sousuke flinches at the catastrophe of vulgar chewing and stray bits of flesh spew from the dog house. Kisumi wipes his hands with a shudder. “I have never been more of a vegetarian in my whole life. Anyway, what brings you to my neck of the woods?”

Sousuke shuffles his feet. “I’m, ah.” He grimaces up at the claws of tree limbs overhead. “I’m in a bit of a mess, Kisumi.”

One of Kisumi’s pointed ears flicks, but he doesn’t say anything. Sousuke clears his throat. “I wanted to apologize about what happened to Asahi at the warehouse, too.”

The faerie’s wings lower as he glances at the cottage. A candle sits in the lone window, illuminating the rustling silhouettes from within. Kisumi sighs. “It’s not your fault, Asahi is the one who volunteered to go.” He gives the alpha a look. “But I can’t depend on Asahi to make smart decisions for himself, Sousuke.”

He nods in understanding. “He’s more than welcome to stay out here and heal up for as long as it takes. I’m not allowing him to go on patrols for another week.”

Kisumi’s gaze slides to the side because he wasn’t asking permission, though it’s clear there was going to be a fight if Sousuke said anything less. “Good.” The seelie’s expression grows more familiar, friendly. “Then I suppose you’re also here about Rin?”

He wavers. “You – you know him?”

“Known him for about twenty years, actually. You smell like him now – rainberry.”

Wearily, Sousuke’s nose ducks against his sleeve. “It’s that sugary smell, isn’t it? I’ve never come across it before.”

“Yes, that’s it – wintery sweet.” Kisumi’s eyes sharpen into a knowing look. “Sounds like you like it. Rainberries aren’t natural, they’re spliced between cherries and snowdrop bulbs.”

He ushers Sousuke closer to the house and the alpha is surprised that the structure is an actual mushroom, albeit enchanted. The bulbus roof is speckled, and veiny tendrils pull across the underside. He runs a hand down the wall to find that the exterior is mushy, almost gelatin, and it sucks in his handprint. Kisumi pushes the short, round door open and Sousuke asks, “What are rainberries used for?”

Kisumi ducks inside with a grin. “Love potions.”
As expected, the inside is circular with uneven walls cupped outward. It’s a cluttered but cozy space with potion shelves of glowing stones, crushed petals, and teeth. Some bottles are shaped like swans, other like butterflies. Dried bouquets take up every inch of the walls and rusty crescent moons hang from the rafters.

Sousuke steps out of the way as an enchanted broom sweeps the hardwood, and a feather duster ruffles across the window. He looks up to see that the mushroom top acts as the ceiling, spinning slowly in a mandela pattern. There’s a pine trunk in the center of the floor with a spiral staircase wrapped around it, leading up to a loft.

An unnamed faerie hovers over the stairs, sitting in the air with his legs crossed. He blinks peachy eyes at Sousuke – seelie have no whites, no pupils to their eyes, but his gaze seems kind enough. His blonde curls are tucked in an oversized blossom that’s used as a hat; the stem curls at the top. His pointed ears are longer than Kisumi’s, but his stature is properly faerie sized. “Wow,” the seelie balks. “You’re even bigger than I thought you’d be.”

Sousuke startles a confused smile. “Thanks?”

Kisumi chuckles. “Sousuke, this is Nagisa.”

“We’re cousins,” Nagisa beams. He doesn’t glow at all, and his wings are maple leaves. Seems like the smaller the faerie, the more they prefer to hover above everyone else.

Kisumi rolls his eyes. “All fae are cousins.”

Asahi lies on a straw mattress by the reading nook and guilt floods Sousuke. His tan is covered in bruised-black, and Asahi is restless with pain, whining deliriously for his mate until Kisumi plops beside him. The bucket underneath the bed reeks of vomit and blood drips from the covers. Kisumi did a good job of stitching his brow – with pretty green thread, of course – but Asahi’s eye was slashed shut by a silver blade. It will probably never heal.

Sousuke crouches beside the mattress and gathers up Asahi’s fist to hold it. “Hey, brother,” he greets softly.

Asahi rolls onto his side to cough up phlegm and hacks into the bucket. He curls into himself as his skin fevers with chills. “That’s good, puppy,” Kisumi coos, rubbing through Asahi’s matted hair. “Look who here’s to see you.”

Asahi’s good eye lazes open with the faintest grin, his teeth still bloody from the warehouse. “Hey, man.” He squeezes Sousuke’s hand with a voice that is heartbreakingly weak. “Good t’ see you.”

“I’m so sorry, Asahi.”

“Not like… not like you got out unscathed.” He gives Sousuke a weary look.

Sousuke sighs. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that, too.”

“Stop.” Asahi gets Kisumi to help him turn onto his side so he can face Sousuke. “Ain’t your fault, whatever’s goin’ on wit’ your wolf.” He gnaws his lip. “… it ain’t like I can really judge, y’know?” He nudges Kisumi’s thigh for emphasis.
Sousuke hesitates. “I think this might be a little different, Asahi. I didn’t choose this vampire.”

Asahi tries to rub his slashed eye and Kisumi pins his hand down with a playful look of warning. Asahi flops back with a groan, exhales rattling.

Nagisa flutters off the stairs and slips out the window, coming back with a bucket of water and a rag. He pats the damp cloth across Asahi’s forehead, whispering suggestions of sleep in a language that is disorienting to hear.

Kisumi ushers Sousuke to the fireplace and sits him down. The fae says, “Have you realized that you’re bleeding all over the place?”

Sousuke glances at his shoulder, cupping the soaked bandage only for bloody rivulets to swell between his fingers. “Shit, sorry.”

Kisumi huffs and gestures for him to move his hand. The seelie is delicate in unwinding the gauze, jerking back at the stench. “Are you rotting?”

Sousuke loses his breath when he looks down. His shoulder looks like the proper stabbing victim, but he wasn’t expecting to see his veins protruding and black. “What…” The poison slides down his arm, staining his fingernails and numbing his hand. His blood feels like ice.

Kisumi runs glowing palms up Sousuke’s arm, features twitching around questions. “I’m assuming this isn’t the standard reaction to silver?”

Sousuke swallows, carefully turning his arm. It feels like lead. “No, silver makes us sick but – but it’s kind of like the flu. Not like this.”

Up close, the alpha can see that Kisumi’s pale-green skin is actually iridescent. “Then this wasn’t silver.”

Sousuke uses his good arm to reach into his pocket. “Might have something to do with this thing.”

Kisumi eyes the dagger wearily before using his magic to let it hover in the air. He brings it closer to squint at it. “Ah. This is witchcraft. The rune means toil.” The faerie spins the dagger with a mocking mutter. “Double, double, toil and trouble.”

Nagisa cackles. “Fire burn and caldron bubble.” He gives a scornful roll of his eyes.

Sousuke is struggling. “Does your kind not like witches?”

“No really,” Kisumi snorts, arms working to keep the dagger floating. “Witchcraft is human-formed. They would have never learned the concept of spells if it weren’t for us.” At Sousuke’s confusion, the faerie sobers up but doesn’t elaborate.

Nagisa does it for him, softly. “We weren’t always such a hostile race. Before we ever transformed a single person into a wendigo, we were very close with humans. We taught them the herbalism of spells and prided in seeing them excel. We even had sympathy for their kind; we took their sick children and made them better.”

Sousuke reels. “By turning them into fae?”
“No, that’s not possible. Fae are born during spring’s first bloom – in nature. The smell of our mother flower follows us forever.” He gestures to himself happily. “I was born from a maple sprout, and Kisumi…”

Sousuke turns to the faerie as it dawns on him. “Nightshade.”

“Correct,” Kisumi smiles. “So no, we could not make sick children into beings like us, but we could at least make them comfortable. We treated all of them like little royals. We made the world their fairytale.” He shakes his head in memory, voice tightening. “And we mourned those children when they finally slipped away. I can still tell you the name of every baby I’ve cared for over the last eight-hundred years. They were the most precious things.”

Sousuke can’t stop from balking. “Eight-hundred –?!”

The seelies laugh together. Nagisa leans in uncomfortably close. “How old are you, Sou-chan?” He sniffs at him. “You look like you were about twenty when you turned, but you smell around a hundred and twenty?”

Sousuke’s expression drops. “I’m a hundred and thirteen.”

“That average for your kind?”

The alpha lifts his chin. “Werewolves normally have a lifespan of two hundred years – though, we don’t often die from natural causes. We usually perish in fights, or from silver.”

“Damn,” Nagisa sighs, kicking his feet up in the air. His gaze roams to the dagger and he freezes. “Wait.” He dives over, wings quicken to a hummingbird’s pace, and the wind knocks Sousuke’s chair back. “Wait, this is Haru-chan’s dagger!”

The alpha blinks. “Who?”

“No, really?” Kisumi cups his hand beneath the dagger like he’s holding an invisible bubble. “Ah, now it makes sense why this blade isn’t silver. Haru would not have been able to touch it.” He chuckles at Sousuke’s exhausted bewilderment. “Haru is one of the vampire court,” he explains. “But he was a witch before that. I wasn’t aware he still practiced.”

“He’s like, the loophole in our witchphobia.” Nagisa smiles. “At least for me.”

“But Rin was the one who threw the dagger at me.” Saying the name out loud does confusing things to Sousuke’s betrayer of a heart.

Nagisa purses his lips. “Haru must have cursed it for Rin, then.” He turns a grimace to Sousuke’s shoulder. “I don’t know if that’ll heal, Sou-chan. Haru’s a powerful witch and he might have done something crazy to that dagger, if it was intended to protect Rin.”

“Nonsense,” Kisumi scoffs, shouldering his cousin away. “A witch’s magic is nothing in comparison to a fae’s.” He pats Sousuke’s back as he flies over to a shelf. “I’ll have you better than ever in no time.”

“Thank you, but…” He rubs his arm, hesitating. “What about my…” He gestures to his head. The bond.
Kisumi hesitates, busying himself by grabbing a vile from the shelf. He pours it into a mug and the drink looks slimy, has the consistency of snot and smells just as bad. The faerie hands him the drink and the mug vibrates with the amount of magic in the potion. The bit of parsley the seelie decorates the concoction with is just as offensive. “Drink this.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll stomach it better if you don’t know.”

Sousuke’s guts roll. “Will it hurt, whatever it does to me?”

Nagisa smirks before the other seelie shoots him a look. Kisumi vows, “I wouldn’t hurt you, Sousuke.” He pauses. “You’ve given me no reason to.”

Sousuke tries very hard not to think about what will happen if that ever occurs.

The drink is warm as it snails down his throat, and he can’t help but gag. He clenches his stomach and holds his breath, utterly sickened. Kisumi nods at his shoulder. “It’s already working.”

Sousuke looks down to find the blackness fading grey beneath his skin. It’s a distressing sight, but at least the ache is subsiding. “Thank you.”

Kisumi smiles faintly, gaze sliding to the side. “Did you dream about Rin?”

The alpha takes great pause – can the fae know that without even casting a spell? If that’s the case, then there’s no point in lying, as embarrassing as the confession is. “Yes.”

Nagisa floats over, lying on his belly in the air. “Was it interesting?” The connotation is obvious, and Sousuke’s blush answers for him.

Kisumi ponders, “I’m sure that Rin is angry; his emotions probably manifested through that dream.” His wings twitch in thought. “He might be on edge because he doesn’t understand why you aren’t hurting him.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Sousuke answers before he can think about it. His mouth firms into a shameful line. “Look, he didn’t ask for this. It’s not fair to continue tormenting someone outside of battle.”

“I know. You’re a good alpha for that.” Kisumi could have so easily said a good mate.

The faerie glances around the back of Sousuke’s neck, right on his scruff. Nagisa does the same and his whisper is stunned. “He bit you.”

Sousuke’s breath quickens. “Yeah.” He puts a self-conscious hand over the mark. “But then he started –” He recoils.

“Drinking you,” Kisumi breathes. Those words don’t sound right together. Drinking a person is a more disturbing concept when it’s spoken aloud. The faerie gives him a once over. “I think something inside of Rin chose you as well, Sousuke. He wouldn’t drink your blood unless something in it spoke to him.”

“Speak?”
Nagisa tips his head back and forth with a wince, knowing Sousuke isn’t going to like what he says. “Vampires call it their singer: someone with blood so good that they lose all control. They go into a fever. That’s how they find mates in their culture.”

Sousuke is broken with defeat. “I don’t know what to do.”

Kisumi sighs and goes over to sit beside Asahi, lacing their fingers together comfortably. He’s looking at his mate when his voice drifts. “You wish to break the bond.”

“Yes.”

Kisumi gives him an unconvinced look, though he humors him. “Why?”

Sousuke’s mind goes blank and he lets the words drone from him. “I can’t put my pack in danger.”

“We know,” Kisumi comforts. “Everyone knows how far you would go for the pack’s well-being.” He traces Asahi’s knuckles. Kisumi doesn’t have fingernails. “This bond is not a curse, nor can it fade. I’m surprised that you expect your pack to be so prejudiced when your most sacred vow is to let your wolf guide you.” His smile is sympathetic. “Animals can’t lie, alpha.” He leans forward. “Do me one favor. Forget that Rin is a vampire and tell me what you feel. What can you tell me about him, just from that storm going on inside of you?”

Sousuke nearly grinds his teeth down, but he forces all his attention into the bond. “He’s…” His eyes close and he searches frantically in the dark. “Violent.”


The white-hot fury is most obvious. “He hates me. He wants to kill me more than anything else in the world.”

Kisumi nods, not doubting it. “Your own anger is fueling his fire, you know. Remember that your emotions will gratefully influence each other from this point on. If you are angry, then he will be too, regardless if he knows why.” His expression shifts. “If he cries, you will ache to comfort him regardless if you despite him.”

There’s an aloof sensation that makes Sousuke’s pulse startle quicker. “He’s… fast-paced. Witty? He’s… quick on his feet, I don’t know.”


“Brave,” Kisumi repeats almost smugly. “That’s a good trait, don’t you think? He’s the prince, so he’s capable of loyalty.” He lifts his chin. “You’re admitting that he has redeemable characteristics. Doesn’t that mean he’s capable of devotion? As the prince, he must be reliable to some degree. Why would he take the position if he didn’t care?”

Sousuke’s voice is low and so, so tired. “What are you getting at?”
“You know that the vampire is capable of love, Sousuke.”

“I’m not.” His voice is grim with the resolve. “Not for him.”

Kisumi casts an exhausted glance at the ceiling. “You must give yourself more credit.” He doesn’t explain such an elusive statement, though his smile turns kind. “I’ve known Rin for quite some time, and he is a good man that just happens to be a vampire.” He gives Sousuke a look of playful reprimanding. “Just like you’re a good man.”

The sewers breathe in a hollow roar as Rin searches for Haru, cradling his forearm all the way. Steam muddles the air, making the walk all the drearier; humidity clings to Rin’s face and drips off his hair in a glimmer of makeshift sweat that his body can no longer form. His mind is dull, as well as the world around him.

He pauses when the steam gathers into a shape, and it expands before him, molding the shape of a person – hair, features, a body, every bit of it colorless. Rin blinks in recognition. “Oh. Hey, Albert.”

The ghoul smiles and floats along, joining Rin on his walk. The vampire scowls to himself because he is not in the mood to appease company, but then again, he would not feel any different even if he weren’t doomed with these circumstances. He clears his throat. “You wouldn’t happen to know where Haru ran off to?”

Albert nods with tangible enthusiasm, pleased to be acknowledged and happy to be of importance. Rin’s features soften and he walks along more subdued. He supposes that life would get rather depressing to an extreme, wandering the maze of sewers with nobody to talk to. However, Rin doesn’t really know what to say to Albert. Awkwardly, he grunts, “Are you well?”

The ghoul shrugs into a nod and guides him to a wide groove in the wall. He gestures at it, making Rin smile. “Thank you, I appreciate it.”

Rin ducks into the small alley, thankful that the space expands the deeper he goes. Piping trembles and hisses from above, dripping moisture. A protruding aroma overwhelms him – acrylic.

The alley widens until he’s able to stand and Rin gazes at the murals climbing the walls – smeary orange blossoms, Greek pantheons and a view of the moon from underwater. There’s so much red in the grimmer memories. There’s bluescaped London, all the figures blurred in terrified motion, bombs lighting up a slumbering harbor in the dead of night. They are all painted from a bystander’s point of view and the horror is perceptible in every brush stroke.

He finds Haru sitting at a clean wall, giving color to bare bricks. There’s vases of brushes and bits of charcoal scattered around him with murky cups. Rin crouches beside him to study the portrait being swept to life. It’s a man in a tattered frock, both hands clawing at his hair in the middle of a frantic scream. Rin lifts his brows. “Looks like a Courbet.”

Haru scoffs. “God, you’re so Victorian I can barely stand it.”

Rin’s grin turns positively slimy just to spite him. He sits down with a huff, failing to quell his trembling arm. He watches Haru work with an odd sort of silence – Haru paints stubbornly, not letting the depressive pressure of Rin’s gaze sway him. At long last, Rin says, “You told father.”
“I did,” he admits without hesitation. He swirls the brush in plum, dots it into the man’s hair for contrast.

“You betrayed me.”

Haru looks at him from the corner of his eye and that one look forces Rin to accept the reality that he is being extremely condescending and all around rude – everyone is just waiting for him to grow up and face the consequences of his actions.

Rin’s gaze skitters across the bricks as his voice frails. “The doctors can’t do anything for me.”

“I didn’t expect otherwise.” Haru continues painting, though the motions are appropriately subdued now. “Werewolf bonds aren’t magic, they’re…” He rolls his lips for the word. “More primitive than that.”

“But I’m not a werewolf. So I’ll be fine, right?”

Haru looks pained for a twitch, but his voice is palpably exhausted by Rin. “What do you want?”

Hurt knifes him. Haru is disappointed in his actions, though he should be used to Rin’s antics by now. Keyword: antics. He’s not following Rin into successful fits of glory, he’s cleaning up his messes, always.

Rin burns with guilt that he will never voice. “I need you to get rid of this.”

Haru jerks around to face him with appropriate frustration. “You are so –” He closes his eyes and fumes an exhale. His posture straightens as he goes back to his work. “I can’t.”

Rin bristles, panic clawing up his spine. “You mean you won’t?”

“Oh, please.” Haru’s bangs fall between his narrowed eyes, gaze firm on the wall. The fact that he can’t even look at Rin hits home.

“You’re a witch,” Rin says, muscles clenching in restraint – it’s a failed attempt. “You can do something about this, you just don’t feel like it.”

Haru doesn’t say a word, and it’s too smug for Rin to take.

Rin gets up in a storm and he doesn’t mean to scream, but it just flies out of him. “Why won’t you just get up?” Haru doesn’t move and Rin could burn alive. “Stop fucking sitting there and do something.”

“I do everything,” Haru retorts just as hotly, blue fire against the ocean of Rin’s crimson fury. “I am so tired of saving your life and you hating me for it.” His voice is all growl, unrecognizable and quite frankly, traumatic. Rin is frozen but Haru is all exasperated motion. “I feel worse for that fucking wolf because now he’s stuck with your childish goddamn antics.”

Rin stands there in wide-eyed shock as Haru pants. The regret is obvious in Haru’s glare, but he must be taking after Rin because he doesn’t speak on it. The brush dips into black, and he glides it across the bricks. “Go away.”

Rin cranes back like he’s been slapped. The small, mature part of him knows that he would have
deserved it. His eyes prickle but he stomps away before Haru can catch the glimmer.

When he’s at the lip of the alley and muffling sniffles, Haru calls out tiredly. “When you dream of him –”

Rin stumbles around. Haru's mouth firms into an apologetic line. “When you dream of him, don’t be afraid. He can’t hurt you.”

Rin reels. “He can’t or he won’t?”

“… he won’t.”

Sousuke keeps his fists clenched while Nagisa nurses his shoulder. The little faerie uses a blade to slice open pockets of tar swelling from Sousuke’s skin, and it oozes out in a hot, grey flood. Nagisa flicks the mess into the fire, then wipes the excess from Sousuke’s arm. The seelie mutters, “Well, that got the physical part of the curse out, at least. You might feel trippy for a while, though.”

“That’s fine.”

Nagisa laughs. “Maybe it’ll be fun.”

He binds Sousuke’s shoulder with a rope of bay leaves slathered in aloe, and the alpha’s gaze drifts to the mattress in the corner. Kisumi lies beside Asahi, watching his alpha’s expression as it twitches in fitful sleep. All at once, Asahi’s brows furrow and a protective hand closes around the seelie’s hip. The werewolf jolts awake. Kisumi yelps; Asahi’s breath rolls into a growl.

Every hair on Sousuke’s body stiffens upright.

By some unknown force, each pair of eyes turns to the window. Sousuke prowls over to the door and crouches to open it, listening, eyes searching. Dawn’s approach bleeds winter-green through the forest and all the birds are silent. Even the fallen leaves are still with fear.

A thunderous advance is muffled by the distance, galloping closer at a frantic race. Sousuke is gasping in time with the pattern, and Asahi flies upright as hysteria strikes the pack bond.

Sousuke careens out the door on all fours. His paws crash against the dirt and he flies between the trees, stray limbs tearing at his snout. His shoulder spasms and his front leg drops, throwing him down the hill before the bedrock catches him. The pain blinds him but he hauls himself up and limps, pleading that his nose alone can guide him to the den.

His blood explodes at the stench of fire.

Sousuke kicks into a run, vision narrowing each time his front right paw hits the earth. He slides to a stop, dust billowing, and shapes fly by him – wolves retreating, pouncing over fallen logs and sliding through the mud, determined to keep running.

Sousuke dives for a straggler pup before the stampede can take her; he grabs her by the scruff and finds her father by his stricken howls. They abandon him in the fray and Sousuke notices his injured wolves struggling up the hill. Sousuke ushers Makoto up the slope, using his head to push his weight. Frantically, the alpha snaps, What happened!
Wendigo, Makoto croaks, his voice as spent as his wolf portrays. Wendigo in the den.

Sousuke bristles.

Satomi collapses into him and she slumps to the ground, fainting for ten petrifying seconds. Aki yanks at her scruff but Satomi cannot will strength into her legs – however, she can sure as hell bite Sousuke’s leg to get his attention. Mom stayed, she rasps, eyes icy and bloodshot. Mom stayed to help the elders get out, go help her!

Sousuke’s legs are moving before he can even comprehend it. He breaks through the den’s clearing and staggers around, heaving with exertion. His snout glides across the dirt to follow a trail, but there’s no stench of decaying wendigo. Sousuke uses his eyes to guide him instead, chasing the smokestack that blooms from the back of the den.

He halts, tail dropping slack. Fire has swallowed the elder’s hut and the furious heat of it singes the alpha’s fur. He dodges around to look for hands reaching out, he listens for screams, but all is silent around the flames.

The hut’s opening has yet to be destroyed and Sousuke dives in, the smoke watering in his eyes. All around him, the world is hopelessly grey.

That’s when he smells the blood. The opened flesh. The char of bodies left to burn.

The smoke lifts and Sousuke nearly faints at the sight – he is a lost child, mind torn apart with confusion.

The elders are gutted, skin peeled away by fangs, their heads cracked open from brute force. Some made the futile effort to transform and their bodies are half wolf – one arm splayed out, lifeless, while the other is shriveled and furred. They lay open with unraveled intestines, throats gaping, and their hearts are nothing but red mush in the dirt. Their eyes are wider than comprehensible; they wear expressions of shock and – and betrayal.

Sickening awareness churns through Sousuke when he feels a gaze on him.

He sees his mother’s grey wolf – her coat is soaked red as if she bathed in it, and she looks every bit the wild savage that the world fears them to be.

Kaori has an elder’s face squeezed between her jaws and Sousuke flinches when their head pops. Blood splatters him and he swears it is even hotter than the flames around them.

Kaori rises, wavering on her feet and panting for her life. Surely, she senses his questions, can feel it in the very air around them, but his mother’s cold eyes only offer one response.

A mother takes care of her pups.

Chapter End Notes

- the fabric of your flesh, pure as a wedding dress. this is a florence + the machine quote from her wonderfully magical song howl, very werewolf-prosy, i adore it.
- like wild beasts living without a future / fear and flee the wolf. the carter mentioned by miyako is angela carter, a fascinating poet. she commonly turns girls into wolves.

- double, double, toil and trouble. most of us have heard that witch rhyme sometime in our lives but fun fact! this was first used in shakespeare's macbeth :DDDD

- how rin's wounds were healed: it was a challenge to figure out just how vampires would scar if their skin is described as "stone" or "marble" in so much classic literature, so literally i was just googling "how to repair fissures in granite countertops" and came up with the acrylic method. just think of their skin as pliable marble.

- i'd rather just explain this here than try to cram it awkwardly in the text - how do vampires actually have blood, how can natsuya drink from nao: even though vampires have to drink blood out of thirst, it's always been strange to me that they're still able to bodily function when they're corpses - minus all the magic stuff. so in this universe, when a vampire drinks blood, it goes into their veins and acts as blood normally would. if they don't drink blood, their bodies will stop functioning. there's so much science that could crush that from all sides, but that's what we're going with. let me have my fun lol.

- just to establish the ages in a more digestible form: rin (and his family) are from the victorian era, and he was born in 1840, so he is around one hundred and seventy eight years old. it has not been revealed in the text how old he was when he changed into a vampire, but he was eighteen. sousuke was born in 1906, so he is one hundred and thirteen, and he became a werewolf at nineteen years old. how either of them became what they are has not been told yet, but it will be in time. :)

- haru did curse that dagger for rin, but he did it behind rin's back because he knew rin was going after sousuke.

thank you so much for reading! i hope you enjoyed, please let me know what you think.

come say heyo on twitter & curious cat
Teething

Chapter Summary

He turns to see the wolf observing him. Indignation strikes Rin, hot and sharp and justified. His heart opens with rebellion. He breathes hard. His fists clench.

The wolf only watches, a pillar of impassive wisdom.

Chapter Notes

hi yall! thank you for your patience.

i’d like to continue this story as an exploration of parts of being an english major that i actually enjoyed (lol) so the rest of this fic will continue to have a lot of abstract concepts that are sometimes subjective, or there are bigger messages than what is being portrayed. i’ve added some end notes for a bit of my own explanations, but i’m very interested to see what you believe some stuff means as well. for example, we know that the color red has symbolic meanings, but what do you think it means in the context of how it’s used in this chapter specifically?

with this being a supernatural fic + big abstract concepts, things can get a little dark, so i am now tagging this fic as horror just to be safe.

wendigos have been changed to reapers.

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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She cried, “Laura,” up the garden,
"Did you miss me?"
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez’d from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen
The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,
Their fruits like honey to the throat
But poison in the blood."

Christina Rossetti - "Goblin Market"
When you are a corpse, running for your life means that whatever is chasing you must be a reckoning.

Rin flies out of the cabin, frail as a petal plucked thin. He is trapped at the nauseating top of the world, high on vertigo in a snow globe with a cabin best suited for cozy mysteries spoken with child in lap. He is somewhere he does not belong – somewhere he is not welcome.

The moon is his laughing chandelier that spins, dancing for his demise. The forest carries a darkness more primitive than death, but he spares no time to let the moon teach him poetry – he staggers through the bushes and prays for the sanctuary of shadows.

Icy moonlight chases him as the woodlands take on a harsh palette: skinny towers of birch and black earth. The forests are a grotesque beauty with their witch-fingered trees; the air is bright with snow while the sky is a hollow ballroom of gyrating stars, and they watch him, tell him to be gone.

Like blood to a vein, Rin races to the top of the woodlands, frantic to hide in the ribcage of anything dead and protective. The lightning itself orders enlightenment into his life, but Rin runs from it.

Thorns cut his bare feet open like pretty red fruit, and he realizes that he is prey – just livestock that slipped from its cage. To the forest, he is nothing more than a consumable body all soft and raw for the taking.

The woodlands allow him to keep running only because it is Rin’s nature, and the forest respects nothing more. There is no free will to hunger, nor is there any compassion to be found in flowers, in dirt – not from the roots to the stars. Such sympathy has no stake in the hierarchy of nature, and Rin is at the bottom of the food chain, so low in value that his only comparison is the moldy flesh the vultures have yet to swallow.

He cries out for his father in the night, his mother, Haru, even Gou. Only the crows answer, and they chase Rin with their toothless jaws stretched open, chanting, you can’t see the signs behind the apple of your eye! You can’t see the signs behind the apple of your eye!

They pluck at his eyes, biting his cheeks to force them into an aroused, apple-color; they make a canvas out of him, talons carving runes into his forehead before he swats them away.

The woodlands ripen him for the taking: the wind licks his robe open; trees yank the silk away and the birches are sentient in the humiliation they give. A root curls up to steal a chunk of his hair, leaving Rin with a deep-sated dread that never left the pit of his gut.

He must run because he doesn’t know what else to do. He is too afraid to give up. He pants, he cries; he is pathetic and does not care.

Rin trips on slippery moss and crashes into a river. When his kneecap takes the fall, it splits in half like a parted apple; a red mouse swims out to take his fleshy bits for the taking. Rin cries, blinded with pain, his hands locked around his ruined knee, and red trickles through his fingers.

He wavers, not understanding as he brings his palms out of the water. They drip blood.

His mind reels. His pulse drops.
Rin is suddenly aware of how cold he is. He is bleeding and alone, the worst-case scenario for a human.

A growl creeps through the trees and Rin hiccups on a sob. A musk prowls over him – honeydew, masculine sweat.

What bitter irony there is in being only worth your flesh. Rin is naked for the taking, godless of modesty, defenseless and curious – a truly damming combination.

The wolf stalks through the bushes and gazes at the full of him. He commands nature, and how could he not when his mother watches on from the sky?

The moon surely takes pride in her beast of a child as he looms over Rin. Meadows of nightshade glow in her delight, perfumed with poison. The wolf makes Rin feel smaller than a hemlock stem and just as frail. He is foreign to prayer, but any knowledge of mythos is unnecessary in the wake of this creature before him. He is a god. Perhaps he only controls the woods, but that would mean that Rin is the black rose of his life because he is ready to bow before this wolf like a flower to rain.

There’s religion in those eyes – scripture woven into each fleck of throbbing color. Rin thinks he remembers that language from a past life. A foreign, sick part of him is excited for the moment when they will be one – when his flesh is nestled in the warm pouch of the wolf’s gut, devouring him most sweetly.

He’s going to make Rin bleed. The bite is a necessary betrayal, a part of him whispers. *How do you think the trees feel in winter?* It is their nature to bloom and their nature to die. Nature is not fair. Betrayal is the bridge that guides one season into the next.

The wolf gives him a once over, looking at Rin’s winter-cherry complexion and his trembly fingers. He prowls forward, sloshing through the river with stoic regality – even the air seems to sigh its submission.

When they are close enough for Rin to feel the damp heat of him, he lifts his chin to the wolf. “Eat me.”

He always taunted better than anything else.

The wolf gives him a sort of look – impatient. His gaze lifts to the birches and Rin starts to follow before a terrible noise shakes the forest. Their antagonist has no form, but Rin feels the pressure. The plates of the earth grind. The air tightens to a fever-pitch. His ears ring.

Pressure, nauseating pressure all hot around him.

The wolf snarls and drags Rin down to hide beneath his underbelly, protecting him behind a wall of muscle and sweaty fur. The wolf grows with enough power to make the water ripple, and something dawns in Rin’s foggy-pink mind. “You’ll take care of me.”

The wolf glances down at him like that’s obvious - like it's nature.

Rin pulls a shaking hand from the water, lifts it. The wolf bristles in dread but Rin can’t stop, and when his palm sinks into black fur, light burns him out of existence.
He bolts awake with a terrible sound, a screech of petrifying frequency. Before he’s even fully conscious, Rin blindly claws up his bedroom wall to the ceiling beams – the highest point, safest.

He heaves with nails digging against his heart as his thoughts slowly link to coherency. He gropes his knee and it’s fine; his cheeks have not been plucked open by crows and he isn’t naked.

However, there’s pure fire in his gut. He’s starving for a taste that still lingers in his mouth, and he’d scrape his gums raw if only he could find more of it.

Rin licks his teeth, pushes his fangs back into his mouth. He swallows a few times, hoping for more dregs of the honey he’s burning for.

Rin flops down on the beam and drags a ragged hand through his hair, fingers drifting down to his chest. He remembers bits and pieces of the dream with loathing, near sick with himself. Then he remembers the light and Rin’s eyes fly open as a name spills from his mouth.

“Sousuke.”

Oh, just letting that gorgeous name roll off his tongue is the most pleasurable sacrilege of self. His eyes dart as he whispers it slower, hoping that the quiet around him will not break. He wants to be alone with this name, taste it.

Hot sugar floods his mouth and it makes him shake. He is thirsty.

His heart bounces because there is no blood around, no blood in his gut, and he is ready to fall to his knees in a thousand different ways. He wants to pray, wants to fuck. There is nothing too deplorable in the wake of this lust.

Rin’s vision dizzies and numbness floats through his limbs; a fever burns through him. His thoughts devolve into one core desire to feed as his morals conspire to make it so.

He breaks out of his room and there is only a little corner of his mind left coherent, watching himself rampage through the halls. Not even when he was newborn did he crave so forcefully - he is slashing at walls, stumbling barefoot through the sewers to find a doomed heartbeat. His awareness narrows until an animal would have more sense of sentiment.

Someone calls out to him, so familiar that Rin almost remembers who it is - other voices join in alarm and people grab him, pull him back all started. Rin fights. He fights with his nails and fangs and all the willpower of demented righteousness, then someone mushes a bag against his face with suffocating pressure.

It’s a blood bag - he bites into it and sucks, feels rivulets streak heat down his neck and drip. There’s a kneejerk relief in swallowing, but there is no peace when the taste settles inside him.

Neglect rages through him, his broken heart catching fire, and he screams loud as he can. It’s enough to break free of the arms that bind him and he flies, stumbling blindly through this dark fog of agonizing need. His head is fit to explode like needles digging into his temples.

Someone stronger comes along - there's always someone stronger than Rin. His wrists are pinned and startled voices beg him to calm down, but he thrashes, ready to kill and die if only to sate this thirst.
A wrist shoves against his mouth and he bites because that's all he knows to do in this state - he drinks and it's not what he hoped, but the taste is more familiar than anything else he knows. It was the first blood he ever tasted as a vampire.

Memories swarm as he falls back into reality - bitter flashes of his lowest moment, when he was just a human who wanted to become something stronger. He thought it would come naturally, back then.

As exhausted darkness swallows him, he realizes that he has never been weaker.

The forest is red in this dream.

Perhaps the woods should be blue with miserable shame but his desires are stronger than all emotions, all of nature. Blood is everywhere in this dream, painting the birches, embracing the brambles with intestines. Tree trunks are skeletal in this world, caging a tall stock of guts all snug for winter.

Blood oozes down the valley in a slurpy river; the cloudsweep pink, sickly dew that clots into throbbing mountains. They shutter and breathe, the only noise for miles. Rin stands as the champion of this massacre laid out around him like a feast, and horror has never left him so faint.

He looks around in the echoing silence as a fever pitch builds in his ears - it is too quiet. Rin is alone with his guilt and cannot lick the dirt clean, despite that he is near death with thirst. Something deep and instinctual tells him that he must exhibit some restraint.

Just when the silence pressurizes, threatening to knife his head open, there's a sloppy approach. Feet mush through the earth and Rin smells the odors of piney mildew and exhaustion. He hears the escalating throb of a heartbeat and the air trembles with each pulse.

A heaven-sent aroma floods the air: honey.

He turns to see the wolf observing him. Indignation strikes Rin, hot and sharp and justified. His heart opens with rebellion. He breathes hard. His fists clench. The wolf only watches, a pillar of impassive wisdom.

Rin screams and not even that will shake the wolf. The vampire collapses in the black dirt, whole body raw with hunger and weakness - everything that makes Rin himself.

The wolf doesn't flinch when he lunges. The creature only looks heartbroken and he does not fight back.

**Sousuke** wakes with a start, his vision flashing red with pain. A sense of violation carries over from dreamland and his mind hangs in suspension somewhere high and terrible before floating down to reality. He does nothing but stare at his own paws for several minutes.

He did not fall asleep in his wolf form - no nightmare has ever forced such a panicked response to the surface, but he knows this was no harmless dream. It was a vow of vengeance, and he will feel that truth in his bones for weeks. If only he could recall what happened, but something tells him that he is better off never remembering. His dreams are manifestations of Rin's emotions, so it surely was not pleasant.
Sousuke wonders how he acts in the vampire's own dreams.

He wishes they could meet in unconsciousness and just talk about this so Sousuke may express how truly sorry he is - but that will not do any good. Even if victimhood left the equation, the vampire is greedy for every last drop of Sousuke's blood, and Sousuke's wolf will not allow him to harm a mate when the time comes.

He morphs back into his true self, bones cracking, muscles slithering into place like living water. He sits up and sweat drips off his nose as he looks down at his naked chest. He was wearing clothes when he nodded off - why isn't he now?

He fell asleep at the healer's cave, where his wolves are struggling to recover from the warehouse attack. He must have been sleepwalking, for this part of the woodlands is unfamiliar to him: tan birches stand in a foreboding circle around him, skinny and anciently withered. There is no grass here, only a forest floor of black dirt. The ringing in his ears signifies that he is high up in the mountains; a wall of amethyst granite climbs eastward toward the highest point in the woodlands, where the dragon caves lie.

It is a baffling miracle that he did not fall from the cliff he's found himself on. He looks down at the pit of the world where fog carves a maze through the trees, and there's flickers of motion: deer grazing, bears rustling and groaning. The lake seems quite restless in the distance - perhaps mermaids have migrated up the salt-water rivers for better hunting in woodland lakes, but that is not an abnormal threat which would have brought his wolf to life in sleep.

A shutter bristles over him as his awareness sharpens. Lifting his chin, Sousuke turns to regard his observer and when their gazes meet, a wave of magic fizzles against his skin, burning it. Such a blow would leave a human foaming at the mouth but he only squares his shoulders. "Your highness." It comes out dry.

The Seelie Queen hovers many feet off the ground - she makes everyone look up to her. "Alpha." Her kindness is pleasant to hear, but worrisome to be at the end of.

Miho's wings are bigger than all other fae's with a kickback of wind that could flip a truck, were she angry enough. They are leaves, layers of them that carve the air in two, and they reek of moth balls, mildew. Her skin is formed entirely by birch bark, pale with black veins clawing through the texture. Her crown is one with her head - a massive oval of branches like the nest of a carnivore bird.

The nest rustles and a snakey shape unravels from the branches. It's the black neck of a swan, her body-feathers white. Sousuke has never seen a bird so hulking. Miho reaches up to caress the bird and tells him, "Swans have more songs and poetry written about them than you or I, alpha. This is my Leda. Have you heard her tales?"

He fidgets. "No, your grace."

"Leda was the Queen of Sparta. She fell in love with a swan so handsome that their passion created Helen of Troy."

Nauseous with disturbance, he coughs, "Oh."

Miho shrugs. "Well, it was actually Zeus disguised as a swan and he raped her, but the poem is
quite bewitching."

Leda's mighty head swerves toward Sousuke and her eyes are unnaturally human - broken. Realization seeps into him, cold and terrible, just as Miho gestures to the swan and she dives from the nest to fly away.

Sousuke and the queen watch her shadow flicker through the trees as the swan's haunting croons echo through the forest. Miho says, "Swans are only supposed to sing so beautifully when the die, but she sings like that all the time." She adjusts her crown and her motions are stiffly animated; she has lost all human physicality because fae grow closer to nature the older they get, until they are one with it. Sousuke casts a look at the birch trees around him and wonders who they once were.

Miho's gaze sweeps the full of him and he grimaces, cupping himself out of kneejerk modesty. He notices the basket tucked at the crook of her elbow and says, "My apologies for disturbing you, if - if I disturbed you." He glances around, noticing that it is late and she is alone. "Where is your court?"

"You're much better company than them, alpha. I quite like foraging on my own! I have a certain..." Her gaze skitters away with a bashful smile. "I have certain tastes. I'm very particular about my dinner."

Suspicion creeps into his voice. "I wasn't aware the fae eat anything."

She flutters closer, trying to get a peek through his fingers, and this is most certainly the most bizarre moment of Sousuke's immortality. Miho smiles with no teeth in her mouth. "I'm making you uncomfortable."

"You think?"

She flutters higher with giddiness. "I wasn't aware werewolves are so humble." Her white gown is long enough to touch the forest floor no matter how high she goes and mud stains the end, painting her as a proper relic of virtue and filth. She sighs, "Can't blame a girl for trying."

Sousuke's brows scrunch. "You're not a girl. You're a seelie."

"Is that an invitation for me to prove that I'm a girl?"

"No, no, that's - no."

She looks like she's never had so much fun. "I take it you're lost. Might I guide you in the right direction?"

He decides his words carefully - fae are not known for their acceptance of a denial. "I don't deserve such an honor, your grace. Please, enjoy your night." For good measure, he adds, "I'm sure our paths will cross again."

She isn't moved. Her wings give a mighty flex downward and she floats to the ground; he notices that her feet have a sound of their own, a pulse that bursts when her soles touch the forest floor. A wave of electrical heat strikes his legs and he locks his knees to remain standing, but the flora around them withers black.

Miho saunters closer with a pout. "I don't trust chance to give me what I want. Surely, you came all
this way for something, yes?"

He's forced a step backward by her approach and Sousuke glances over the cliff as vertigo swells between his eyes. "I believe I was sleepwalking -"

"No, you weren't. You were not awake, but you were searching for something. Someone." She tips her head in childlike wonder. "You were whining like a pup all alone in the world. Are you lonely? I get lonely, too."

Sousuke doesn't care to indulge in her misleading hysteria. "And I suppose I stripped all on my own while I was 'looking for someone'?"

Miho blinks wide-eyed. Slowly, her features cut into an expression of cruel satisfaction. "You should have more awareness. If you cannot handle a little trick from a seelie, I cannot fathom how you're ruling an entire pack." She comes close enough for Sousuke to taste her rotten-sour breath. She whispers, "You're really all alone, aren't you, Sousuke? You have a pack to control by yourself because your mother butchered your elders."

A torrent of emotions settle hard in his eyes.

Miho's voice sharpens with delight. "The stench of their blood traveled across the lake to my islands. The woodlands have caged that smell and it has broken the balance of nature. The deer are petrified; the bears are fighting. The birds will not leave their nests and the reapers crawl closer to your den each night because they smell the feast that should have been theirs."

Her lips, sticky with yellow sap, ghost his cheek. "You and I know what your mother did. I wonder when your wolves will realize that you lied to them by announcing that the reapers were the ones who laid slaughter to your elders." She leans back and her gaze darts across the faltering stoicism of his expression. "You already want to fuck a vampire. I'm sure your people can't regard you any lower. Take it as a comfort."

Loathing floods him like a poison. "My pack is free, unlike your fae. Their wills are not mine to bend into submission."

Her cackle is forest thunder. "There is no democracy between animals, alpha." She digs through her basket and pulls out a nightshade flower, drawing an unnaturally long finger up the stem. "There is no democracy in nature either, sadly. She does not flinch when a thorn slices her finger; mud spills from the punctured vein. Miho says, "There is a darkness coming to swallow us all and I worry for my people - all my people. You haven't seen Kisumi lately, have you?"

He grows frustrated with confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, it's just that I haven't seen him for quite a time." Her pine-needle hair dances in the breeze, sharp when it brushes him. "I can't seem to find him anywhere and we have some matters to discuss." She yanks a petal off and plops it right into her mouth.

Sousuke turns to start his journey home, done with her madness. "He defected, you already know that."

Her tone is genuinely startled. "No, I didn't know that."

Sousuke halts. He turns to study her and she looks stunned, but that's impossible. Kisumi said he
defected when the Seelie Court wouldn't accept him being with Asahi. He told Sousuke that he left peacefully -

His eyes close as betrayal knives his heart. Never trust a fae, even when they are your friend.

He chews the inside of his cheek. "A while back, I heard he was going to leave. I haven't seen him since that rumor."

Miho demeanor turns piercing. "That saddens me, deeply so. Did he even say goodbye to that poor pup who yearned for him so badly?"

"I don't know. Asahi's still with the pack."

The queen raises her brow-ridges, drops them. "Well, if you happen to come across him, kindly relay that I'd like him to come home." Her wings straighten and tense with seriousness. "I love him, Sousuke. He is the cleverest of us all." She yanks the nightshade bulb from the stem and chews it up, pausing when she notices the look on his face. "Would you like one?" Miho reaches into her basket and waves a rose at him.

He swallows. Something isn't right. "Why are you..."

"These aren't normal flowers, alpha. I think you'd like one."

Nagisa's voice bounces through his mind. "Fae are born in nature. The smell of our mother flower follows us forever."

Horror pours over him like rain and Miho smiles as he understands. "These are mother flowers." She holds the rose up to the moonlight and the flower bends away from her, quivering. "These petals cradle the unborn of my kind." Miho sighs all forlorn. "My court insists that I should be more trusting, but a girl can only be hurt so many times."

She rips the petals from the stem and Sousuke stumbles backward. The rose petals float through the air, losing their color before crackling away into ash. Miho meets his gaze and holds it, saying, "You never think about how a baby bites you when they're teething. From that point on, we know we can hurt people - especially the ones who love us." She tips her head. "Are you going to let the vampire bite you, alpha?"

Wide-eyed and faint, he lets fur split his body open before fleeing in the direction of the sun.

Rin's solace is not enveloping, nor is it consistent. He sits on his parents' bed with velvet blankets wrapped around him but there is only a dull comfort in the everlasting familiarity of this scenario: his parents coddling him with their guilt, promising that it's fine to be lesser, it's all right to be afraid. Their concern is not a balm in this moment, for Rin's cold neglect radiates from within - it's not due to being what he is, this time.

The king and queen's bedroom is so unlike the bedroom they had when the family was human. This room is tall but narrow, a hallway that may only breathe through the dirty skylight above. The city's murky glow casts brown shadows over his father's bookcases, his mother's vanity with the crack at the mirror's top. The bedroom is romantically musty, a preservation and appreciation of Victorian furnishings and too many portobello lamps - everything that made the couple's human years an illusion of grandeur, rather than what it truly was.
Vampires sentimentalize the past too much, Rin thinks. It is not an exciting journey into the past as he watches his parents' record player spin on the vanity - bitterness strikes him with every jovial note and key, but they always play that record when Rin needs comfort. He doesn't have the heart to tell them how it hurts him so.

He hides his face in the blankets and rocks back and forth as another wave of starvation gnaws at him. Jitters quiver up and down his vocal cords, constricting his parched throat, and his mother brushes her fingers through his hair. Rin didn't mean to slash her cheek open when she pinned him down during his rampage, but she looks hardly offended - only terrified for him. His father sighs from the chair by the bed, wiping his wrist with a paleness turned grey. "Nao, why is he still thirsty? He's nearly drained me dry."

Nao circles the bed to observe Rin with penetrating calculation. His expression is slated in patience, and his steps are leisurely despite the circumstance. His necklaces click together with an old, ancient sound; the noises of him are familiar and Rin reminds himself that Nao knows everything, has seen everything - well, figuratively, at least. He can figure this out.

Nao says, "Even if a drug addict sleeps with a full belly, they are not quelled until they have what they crave."

Haru stands at the far wall, arms crossed with a leg propped against the door. He is not injured like everyone else who tried to stop Rin on his rampage, only disheveled. Rin sadly reminds himself that Haru is probably only here as Miyako's guard to protect her - he is not present for Rin's sake, even if he wears a disordered look of concern. Haru surprises him by asking Nao, "Shouldn't he get better then? After the addiction is broken."

Fear grips Rin. He cannot endure the journey it would take to leave this lust behind. To never get Sousuke's throat in his hands, to never let that honey-blood flood his mouth and roll hot down his throat -

Nao's blind eyes find Rin by the sound of his guilty fidgeting. The elder vampire casts him a sly look before saying to the king, "Only a strong few make it to triumphant sobriety, your grace. I don't predict that the little prince will suddenly be granted such patience." Despite that he cannot see Rin, he is watching him, and Rin cannot hide his demeanor. Nao can feel his greed. The elder says, "I have a terrible suspicion that the werewolf's blood is his cure-all. Do you agree, Rin?"

It feels as though he's waiting to die and everyone's gaze is the slice of the guillotine. Rin mumbles, "His name is Sousuke."

Silence.

Rin keeps his eyes down. "I think - I think his name is Sousuke."

Miyako swallows, features twitching, struggling for poise. "How do you know that?"

"A dream." He huffs it in defeat. "I've been - I've dreamed things, but I don't know what to do with them."

"You will quell no worries with a timid lie," Nao promises. "You know what you need. Your maker's blood will not erase your cravings and we do not have long before you are inconsolable once more." He narrows his eyes. "Speak the truth. Now, please."
Rin rolls his lips in, physically halting himself from doing so. His mother's hand on his back coaxes only a few words from him. "I think his blood is worth a try," he suggests in a mumble - Rin prays he does not sound too hopeful. "I'm sorry that sounds so - so vile, but -"

"Nonsense," Toraichi scoffs, giving him an affectionate shake. "This is not your fault -"

"Toraichi," Miyako interrupts. She sweeps a hand down her robes as she thinks - they are stained all cherry blossom blush and they are torn from when Rin tried to fight her off. "This is not Rin's fault, but it is most certainly a problem. How do you intend to drain a grown alpha without losing your life?"

Nao hides his hands between his robe sleeves and stands straighter - his back cracks mutely. "I suspect the werewolf would accept a request to assist in Rin's - troubles. I do not foresee a fight or even an argument -"

"He is an animal." Toraichi's passion is steadfast. "I will not waste my breath on conversing with that vermin."

Nao glances skyward before sighing. He gestures toward Haru. "Be a dear and guide me to the O Negative wine - it's in the corner, isn't it?"

Haru guides Nao over to an ornate bar cart by Miyako's vanity and asks, "Are you thirsty?"

"No," the elder hushes, groping around for the pitcher and a gauntlet. "Drunkenness brings patience with her godsent embrace."

Miyako rises to pace and the bed rustles before Steve pulls himself out from under the mattress, almost too fat to do so. He growls at Rin's presence before the queen hushes him, and she says, "I agree that we should not approach the alpha so humbly. In these times, honesty is not to be trusted - only intention - and I am sure the alpha knows that."

"Dishonesty will lead to suspicion," Nao reminds her.

Miyako is humored before she lifts her chin. "You cannot stand between a mother and her vengeance, Nao."

"I have every faith in your vengeance, my queen, and your retribution is more pure than salt and blood, but you know what this war will come with."

She sighs, a wave of hair falling loose around her haggard face. "Salt and blood." Miyako turns to her king hopelessly. "What do you want to do, Toraichi?"

He leans his elbows on his knees, massaging a thumb into his abused wrist. The king turns and Rin is miserable with shame as his father squeezes his hand. Toraichi vows, "If this will give you peace, then I will gladly start a war for it, but this ordeal must not be one of fanfare."

The king takes his hand back to rake both through his hair. Toraichi bobs his ankle restlessly. "We mystics are already on shaky ground with the humans and they do not have an understanding of our politics. If they discover that we are fighting, they will prepare for the threat to come to them and all mystics will be punished. We can handle the wolves on our own but if the others find out about this, both vampires and werewolves will be attacked."
"Let me go after the wolf," Rin pleads. "I can do it on my own, just let me try."

"You already tried that once," Haru snaps in exasperation. He glances over the royals and bows his head in apology, his eyes harsh. "Rin, you are very strong when you're thirsty, but the alpha could..." He grimaces. "He might have cravings of his own. It will not be an equal match should you try to fight him this starved, and he's not going to leave the woodlands - he will not abandon that advantage."

"If the fae get involved, they might join the werewolves," Nao predicts, feeling around for the chair by the bar cart. "But the centaurs, ogres and dragons most certainly will."

"Dragons are not sentient," Haru says.

Nao settles his robes and crosses a leg, wrist lazy as he holds his gauntlet. He smiles. "Dragons lay siege to deranged emperors and sprout jewels from fire for the poor, and you think that they do not hold the sentience to understand politics?" He pouts in amused disapproval and takes a sip of wine. "I wonder if the succubi and angels will have the sentience for enthusiasm when we ask them to join our frontlines."

Toraichi makes a stubborn grunt. "This needs to be quieter than that. Our first round of business needs to be getting the alpha here alone and alive." He strokes his chin. "Where is Gou?"

Nao snorts and glances toward Haru, who grimaces. "I believe the princess went topside to get some air, your grace," Haru says, oddly polite.

Toraichi squints at the miserable lie. "She's with Isuzu?"

Haru doesn't blink. "The demoness was not in her grace's company, no. Everyone else is..." He hesitates. "Recovering from earlier."

Self-loathing threatens to choke Rin.

Toraichi frowns before Miyako drones, "She went after the werewolf."

Rin startles. "She went by herself?!" He's not prepared to have his sister's blood on his hands.

"You need not worry, dear one - I doubt she will find the alpha." Nao swirls his gauntlet. "Reapers alert the woodland mystics of any breach in the fence that guards their territory. Gou will not reach a mile inward before her wits come about her and she returns home."

Miyako says, "If Isuzu were with her, by chance - could she not reach the wolf den safely? She can fly."

"It's not flight you need," Nao chuckles. "You need a demon's help, but not because they can fly."

Rin's stomach drops. "A demon?"

Nao leans forward, his moonlit eyes crinkled with the satisfaction of knowing all. "If you will not accept my proposition of going about this peacefully, then I would suggest we bring the alpha here without his pack knowing it was us who stole him. That way, we have a while before they come to a realization and we birth a new war." He leans back, propping his gauntlet on his knee. "A demon
will find a way to get into the wolf den and take the alpha out of it."

"For a price," Toraichi scoffs. "Nao, I can't risk something like that when my son is involved!"

Nao lifts his brows. "Your son is capable of legendary charm, your grace. Demons respect that. And -" His brows lift higher and dread creeps into Rin. "One of them has an enduring affection for your son."

Haru bursts off the wall with indignation. "We are not trusting Seijuro to do this."

"But he'd do it for me," Rin says. "He likes me."

When disbelieving silence falls, Rin winces at his father's dropped jaw and the queen's balking stare. Toraichi splutters, "What - what in the world have you been doing?!"

"A demon," Nao coughs. Haru slides a hand down his own face.

Rin waves his hands at his fretful parents. "It doesn't matter what went on, all right? We need something done and he'll do it -"

"It doesn't matter -?!"

Haru rubs his fingers into his temple. "Have you forgotten that you held a dagger to Seijuro's throat the last time we saw him?"

"He probably liked it," Nao reassures. "Demons are known to have a particular enjoyment for abrasive flirting. Right, Rin?"

"Nao, please shut up," he groans into his hands.

Toraichi is a proper mess, but Miyako only shakes her head to clear it once, twice, then again with a shudder. "Fine. How might we persuade the demon to come here?"

"You could summon him," Nao suggests.

Haru heartily adjusts the weapon strap around his shoulder. He heads for the door. "Oh, I'll summon him."

"Be careful, Haruka," Miyako sighs with her forehead buried against her palm.

A frazzled Toraichi leaves to prepare for the demon's arrival and Nao follows him out. Rin is left alone with his bewildered mother, and when he can no longer take the feeling of her stare, he grimaces up at her. "Father hates me now."

Miyako smirks in amusement at his expense. "Why? Because a werewolf imprinted on you or because you bewitched a demon?"

He flops into the blankets to hide there. "He's never looked at Gou like that before," he muffles. "It's not fair that he hates me for everything and not her."

Miyako sighs and rubs his back with a patience that's lasted centuries - a mother's patience. "Your father does not hate you; he's about to go to war for you. One cannot blame him for being
surprised, and trust me - he does not approve of Isuzu no matter how ardently you try to trick yourself into thinking that he does."

Rin sniffs and Miyako tenses at the noise. The prince says, "Gou is stronger than me and everyone knows it." He pauses heavily. "I hurt so many people today. She would never lose control like that."

The queen urges him to sit up and she faces him, taking his hands. She kisses both his palms. "Gou follows orders. You want to lead, naturally so." She cards his hair back to tuck some strands behind both ears, and she pulls his bangs up to properly look at his face. She thumbs his tears away. "But you also want to do as you please. You have yet to find the balance between being a person and being a king. Kings must endure many failures; I know they feel like the world, but they are necessary."

He picks at his nails, grumbling, "I don't remember father ever finding himself in a situation like this." He swallows. "I don't want to be a king. I just want to be powerful." He lets private imaginations run wild in his voice. "I want to be legendary, I want to be - I want to be strong and brave and intoxicant." He pauses as deeper, haunting wishes rise to life. Rin whispers, "I want to be feared so that no one may touch me in cruel ways ever again."

"You're describing a king, love."

He blinks up at her widely and she laughs. "My absolute maniac of a son," she sighs. "My strong, brave, intoxicant little prince." Miyako smiles, running a finger around his forehead to trace a heart there. Her whisper is defiant with pride. "I'll watch you split the world open before it's all over."

Chapter End Notes

miho's theme: "scribe" from "secret of the scarlet hand"

toraichi and miyako's theme (warning will make you cry): "black is the color" by craig duncan

grab a cuppa and your prettiest notebook cos it's time for ~chapter explanations with beth~ and i guess some of these could be classified as spoilers, so you're free(!) to read or not read.

starting with the first dream, we have The lightning itself orders enlightenment into his life, but Rin runs from it. so the dream is trying to tell rin something, i.e. enlightenment. he goes through a lot in the dream before that enlightenment of realizing that sousuke will take care of him, but does that mean he'll listen?

The moon surely takes pride in her beast of a child as he looms over Rin. Meadows of nightshade glow in her delight, perfumed with poison. we know that nightshade is kisumi's flower, and that both sousuke and rin know kisumi. in this context, rin sees the nightshade "glow in [the moon's] delight", symbolizing kisumi's relationship with asahi since asahi is a werewolf and werewolves are the moon's children.

Only the crows answer, and they chase Rin with their toothless jaws stretched open, chanting, you can't see the signs behind the apple of your eye! what is the apple of
rin's eye? ((his pride))

A root curls up to steal a chunk of his hair, leaving Rin with a deep-sated dread that never left the pit of his gut. if you'll read "goblin market", which the dream was inspired by for me, the main character gives a lock of her hair:

"Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather."
"You have much gold upon your head,"
They answer'd all together:
"Buy from us with a golden curl."

in the poem, the protagonist willingly gives a lock of hair, paying for what she wants with her body. rin did not willingly give the lock of hair - it was stolen from him.

Rin feels the pressure. The plates of the earth grind. The air tightens to a fever-pitch. His ears ring. Pressure, nauseating pressure all hot around him. the pressure described here is very literally, pressure - the pressure rin feels to be more than what he is, the pressure to be stronger and make his family proud. the pressure is falsehood because, as miyako says, rin is already everything he wants to be.

"Would you like one?" Miho reaches into her basket and waves a rose at him. red equals rin for sousuke, and sousuke did not harm the rose.

leda the swan and the greek legend: you know im gonna slip in any distant coral and bone reference where i can thooo~ no but honestly, so - much like miho's dress ("a relic of virtue and filth") the swan's neck is black while her body is white. a contrast of who is inside that swan and what was so horribly done to her. and what does it say about miho that she is now using a victim, a female, as an accessory for her crown?

The bedroom is romantically musty, a preservation and appreciation of Victorian furnishings and too many portobello lamps... toraichi and miyako's room ain't all that pleasant and frilly because it signifies how they have romanticized the past and do not care how "musty" it was - the falsehood, the sentimentality of the past is all that matters.

and yes, toraichi was the one who made rin a vampire. if you'll remember miyako's words from the previous chapter: "... we must stop feeling guilty about the circumstances which brought him to vampirism. and then rin's thoughts from this chapter: Memories swarm as he falls back into reality - bitter flashes of his lowest moment, when he was just a human who wanted to become something stronger. so we are slowly but surely learning more about how vampire!rin came to be, and i am very curious about your theories!

i'm so interested to hear if you noticed anything else i might have put in there! these are by far not all of the symbols and foreshadowing tactics i used, but ones that i had fun delving into. above all, i hope you enjoyed. let me know what you think! heart emoji heart emoji
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!