Trust Without Cynicism is Hollow
by kotaou

Summary

Aomine Daiki comes face-to-face with a reality he isn't willing to accept when the Apparition prince of the neighboring kingdom tries to assassinate him. The conspiracy of his birth leads him on a violent path of betrayal and lies while the threat of war looms ever closer.

Notes

This is a pretty abstract idea that I thought "why the hell not" after sitting down for endless hours to read beautiful works from bexara and Sapphylicious. Somehow it spurred my creative energies. The rating and relationship rosters will be changed as the story progresses. If you enjoy it even a little, it would make me very happy.
I also apologize for changing the summary for the umpteenth time, nothing sounds right after a few days. ; A ;
Chapter 1

Aomine Daiki was not a morning person.

He enjoyed the invigorating kiss of the sun through his curtains. The bustle of townspeople summoned to the halls of the temple and downtown marketplace weren't unwelcome. The allure of freshly prepared porridges and embellished biscuits from the dining hall was anticipated with childlike fervor.

What designated him as an anti-morning person was now yanking his covers from his supine form, sprawled haphazardly across a queen-sized mattress.

He groaned and rolled his head beneath the pillow. "Go away, Tetsu."

Kuroko Tetsuya was nothing if but persistent to an almost nauseating degree.

Not that Aomine didn't appreciate the effort.

Just not when it meant he would be so rudely roused each morning.

"You've assigned me to wake you in time for your meetings with the War Administrator, Aomine-kun." The matter-of-fact tone and hidden message of I told you so didn't please him.

He gripped the pillow and his body curled tight. He waved a dismissive hand.

"Five more minutes."

The shadow swatted down Aomine's hand defiantly, undaunted when a narrow glare was sent his way beneath the marginally lifted pillow.

"You've flaunted your status enough this week, have you not?" With careful and almost expert ease, Tetsu removed the pillow with a quick whip of his arm. "I've already allowed you an extra ten minutes, anyway. I figured you could use it to will away your impending headache."

Aomine visibly winced. Tetsu wasn't titled his shadow for nothing.

The man knew him better than he knew himself.

Of course, the fact that he was a literal shadow only amplified the irony. Despite his fair skin, hair, and eyes, Tetsu was born among the Shadow, a race of the Apparitions who existed among the darkness. Quiet creatures with passive tendencies, they were designated by their dark hair and usual black irises—sometimes ranging from violet to cerulean. Notably a powerful race among the running of five other candidates, the Shadow's power was so feared that the entire population was reduced to one-tenth its original size. Today, most are contracted into servicing those of higher power among the dominant races in the Apparition hierarchy.

Aomine was not among the superior half. Yet Tetsu was hired little over thirty years ago and hasn't left his side since. Many times in the past, Aomine was grateful for Tetsu's loyalty.

But not today.

Or any other morning for that matter.

"I didn't drink that much," Aomine protested, rolling on his back. Since the shadow removed his
bedding, there was no longer the soothing lull of sleep to attract him. He may as well rise.

He threw his legs over the edge of the bed—easily doable given his stature—and swooped to stand. A spell of wooziness washed over him and his brain throbbed lightly.

There it was.

Damn Tetsu and his astuteness.

A small, almost indiscernible, snort told him Tetsu hit the nail on the head.

Which momentarily irked him.

Aomine reached and popped his finger against the shadow's forehead, "Shut your hole and grab me some clothes."

The assault went without nurturing and Tetsu turned to the bedroom's armoire, one of few outlets for Aomine's wardrobe.

It was a spacious room. A master bed, without the usual ostentatious ornamentation of silk drapes and towering bedpost columns, centered the room. Large sliding glass windows arched above a plush lounge chair where Aomine often napped under a mountain of neglected paperwork. A tall mirror sat catty-cornered in company of a tea-table and a lavish oak armoire. Identical bookshelves, patched with sparse volumes, hugged the room's entryway. There were several offers to upgrade the décor. And several more to move Aomine to the priest's quarters, where he would be closer to his benefactor, the Dan—the sovereign of his people.

He declined each time.

The space had been his since before he could remember. He grew up here and added the furniture to his liking as he aged. There was no substitute. Neither the Dan nor the War Administrator, not even his own parents—bless their souls—could convince him otherwise.

He stretched his long, gangly arms, groaning with each satisfying pop produced from his tender joints. His left shoulder strained with an aggressive pain and Aomine wasn't dumb enough to test his luck. Maybe he had drunk too much last night. Arm wrestling the Combat Squad chief with four drinks in him seemed like a good idea at the time. His impaired judgment had allowed his confidence to fester. After all, he wasn't head of the hunter's guild and the War Administrator's Ambassador without purpose. Why couldn't he hold his own in a petty competition against the chief, even while intoxicated?

He snapped to attention when a dress shirt smacked his face. Tetsu's expression beyond the garment was stoic, as always, but with a hint of satisfaction only Aomine could detect. A pair of pants came next, which he caught while fastening the tread of buttons. Tetsu reached for a pair of well-maintained dress shoes and Aomine clicked his tongue condescendingly.

"Don't even. Boots."

The smile that creased the shadow's lips convinced Aomine that he surrendered.

He finished vesting himself.

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The deck was alive with the faint hymn of nature—birdcalls, the trickle of the forked stream below
the deck boards, and the call of what Aomine knew were a pack of wolves yipping after their pups. Streaks of white and slate raked the sky. A blanket of damp coolness flooded the area and inexplicably soothed him. People milled about. Snippets of conversation faded in and out like a radio scanning for a suitable frequency. It was usually busier around this time. Scholars hustling with scrolls and books cradled precisely to their chests. A pack of uniforms strutting self-importantly down the walkway effectively cleaving through the morning throng. Children juggling handmade leather balls compacted with dead foliage. However, this morning Aomine was grateful for the sparse company.

The path opened to a pentagonal platform where four other expanses opened. Burly temples, with the grandeur of Buddhist temples yet the simple architecture of Shinto shrines, rose in the misty distance. Satellite imaging displayed the foundation as five-pointed star with villages dusting its exterior in a mottled glow of gold, green, and mahogany.

"What does Wakamatsu have on the agenda today, Tetsu?" Aomine may as well prepare himself now. The shrill War Administrator was abrasive enough without a pitcher of liquor to exacerbate his effect on Aomine's ability to suffer eccentrics. "Aside from berating my punctuality."

Despite being of similar age, Wakamatsu reserved little respect for him.

The feeling was mutual.

Be it that the War Administrator feared his job was on the line in favor of the Dan's nephew or the man's everlasting penchant for self-preservation, Aomine didn't care.

The welfare of the Ice Apparitions, of his people, that's what mattered. As well as his opinion to preserve national security.

"I didn't intercept many details, but it seems as though the Lord isn't cooperating and negotiations to neutralize border hostilities has ground to a halt. It seems like war is once again inevitable." Despite the gravity of the news, Tetsu's expression did not falter.

Aomine's brows pinched in apprehension.

The Lord—leader of the Fire Apparitions—was a long-standing rival of the Ice following an ugly schism a few thousand years ago. The pair shared many things despite that. Language. Culture.Appearances. The fair eyes and swarthy skin of the Ice—contributions to their Inuit ancestors—and the piercing red glare of the Fire were the only discernible differences. War was a common practice between the two powers, a constant struggle between the innately obstinate and the vehemently fierce.

Rousing with the usual morning wake-up call?

Not so bad.

Add in a percussive hangover and a pulled shoulder?

Miserable.

Throw in the possibility of war with Lord Akashi Seijuurou?

An instant cocktail for a sour mood and a bleak, indefinite future.

Now he regretted getting ballsy with the Combat Squad chief last night.
The remainder of their trek across the wooden pavilion was silent.

The rhythmic thumping of his pen against his supine palm was the only thing distracting Aomine from his agitated brain. He kept an ear open to the debate. Wakamatsu had his moment, derailing from the middle of debriefing a report from one of his many field scouts to scold Aomine and call into question his obligation to the uniform. Against his better judgment, he resisted the attractive lull of rebellion and dipped his head in apology before taking his seat beside the War Administrator's fourth director.

An hour into the meeting, a slip tickled his wrist. On it was scrawled with a faint hand, *I'm sure you'll win next time.*

He shot a scrutinizing glance to the director, Momoi Satsuki. A sweet smile stretched her lips, eyes curious but not demanding. Pale pink hair swept over her shoulder in a lose ribbon. Uncharacteristic of the Ice, but the alien image had grown on them and no one questioned it. Before penning his reply, he noted how she impressively recorded the conference's goings-on without needing to monitor her hand.

*I was sabotaged. He bought my last two rounds beforehand.* The paper was returned in a swift motion.

A snort was her prior response and it pinched one of Aomine's lesser nerves.

*Trademark of a sore loser. I knew I should have chaperoned you.*

He resisted the urge to grumble, disinclined to field another of Wakamatsu's jabs with forged apology.

*Tetsu was with me. If anything, it's his fault I lost and my shoulder's wrecked because of it.* Part of him twinged uncomfortably for shifting blame to the shadow. Yet Tetsu was his bodyguard. Surely keeping his charge from an intoxicated arm wrestling match with a man twice Aomine's build was within the agreement. Or so Aomine liked to convince himself, at times. He didn't mull long over his petty selfishness, as the note was promptly returned.

*I'll rub out the kinks for you later. Don't make a habit of my clemency, Dai-chan!* He scoffed, quickly disguising it with a sniff when the War Administrator shot a look his way. *You didn't give Tetsu-kun a hard time this morning, did you?*

"Aomine."

His head snapped up, eyes scanning those of the directors and Wakamatsu across the table. The twitch of the War Administrator's brow told Aomine he expected an answer.

"Yeah?" A jab to the ribs corrected him. "I mean, yes?"

"We received detailed reports from scouts that Lord Akashi's contingent is showing steady increase. The rate of forest fires has jumped exponentially and an estimated twenty-four percent of our southern villages have suffered."

Aomine dropped his chin into his palm, pen tip clacking against the wood table. His eyes bounced around the room. Most of the men and women present were proclaimed pacifists. Not much was ever achieved from these grunts without approval from either Wakamatsu or the Dan. Though their expertise in their respective fields was to be admired. Aomine hardly had the patience for
geography, statistics, or the social properties that dictated government. He viewed his education was more punitive than rewarding, like most sedentary tasks he was forced to partake in. His one hundred years of life tackling the exigencies of the battlefield was his certification. Surely these people were beyond his years, but their trepidation and deskbound lifestyles put them at a disadvantage that he never hesitated to capitalize. And why shouldn't he?

They hadn't experienced the panic that gripped one's heart while tangling with death. They hadn't witnessed the marring of the very earth they were born from. And they certainly had never been responsible for inflicting cruel death in the name of national security against the future light of the Apparition world.

"It's a ruse." His words were clipped methodically. As was his way. Sugarcoating wasn't his style. Especially when handling a pacifist. They were a walking gray area, endorsing the safest route without a second thought. He needed them to realize that the matter was, in fact, black and white. Either they realize the Lord's intentions and act now or they continue negating his obvious threatening advance and allow for genocide to grip the Ice as it nearly had when the Lightning similarly intimidated the Shadow. "He's bulldozing our border towns to keep us distracted from his impending invasion and all we've been doing is managing the impending civil war at the border."

"How can you be sure that's what Lord Akashi intends?" A challenging inquiry from Wakamatsu's immediate left.

The second director, a shrewd woman, who'd spend a century-and-a-half advocating that the Ice simply avoid hostilities and cater to all of Lord Akashi's demands and expectations of what Aomine and all other members of the War Administrator's collective knew would forever keep their people at his mercy. As they had been for the last sixteen years.

Something Aomine could not tolerate.

Lord Akashi was a man of action. The size of his empire and rate of his economic advancements proved that. Continuing the tyrannical tenure of the last Lord, Akashi encouraged the preservation of Akashi Seiichi's seized land which meant recapturing what the Ice had called home for over two-thousand years. Granted they secured overseas territory in the Western hemisphere, though the likelihood of conquest was minimal. After all, the Fire had no interest in what was not once theirs. Akashi hadn't the time or patience to acclimate to unfamiliar terrain.

The Ice, by comparison, appeared almost prehistoric. Their natural obstinate pride was all that prevented the Fire from violently reclaiming the region. Aomine hoped to keep it that way and if it meant providing frank, overbearing opinions against his seniors, then so be it.

These people would learn the expectations of war in one of two ways.

The choice should be obvious, even to these paper pushing jockeys.

"My seventy-five years of combat experience doesn't speak for itself?"

The second director's face remained hardened.

"No, it doesn't," she sniffed. "You've condemned every attempt at peace we've tried to achieve with Lord Akashi. Always favoring the ways of the brute. As is your nature, no doubt."

His jaw clenched and he shifted to lift from his chair. A grip to his thigh stopped him. He caught Satsuki's gaze, her eyes dissolving his aggression instantly.

"Araki, that's uncalled for," she said, returning her hand to the tabletop once Aomine settled in his
chair again. "Aomine-kun is one of few among us who has experienced Lord Akashi's offensives firsthand. His insight was recommended by more than just the Dan. And furthermore," her voice dropped an octave and her brow creased," your blatant animosity is not appreciated."

Araki's lips seamed a tight line and silence encased the room.

Aomine splayed his hand across his mouth, concealing a smirk.

That's my girl.

"What then," Wakamatsu continued in Araki's wake, "do you propose we do?"

His attention zeroed in on the War Administrator. "Up our defensive perimeter for a start. Lord Akashi wouldn't hesitate to dispatch spies into our region. Traps will be necessary to snare any stragglers that slip through."

He ignored Araki's unshielded eye roll as well as the wave of groans from the row of chairs to his right.

"You want us to use your guild?" Another director, one Aomine doesn't lock eyes with.

"Those brutes catch game, not Apparitions." A third.

"You don't honestly expect us to entertain this idea when we're facing the possibility of war." Aomine scowled at the emphasis, as if the word was taboo and the director uttered it under duress. "Are you out of your mind?"

"My guild," his voice rose unexpectedly, spooking a handful of fainthearted members.

Wakamatsu even reared back a fraction.

Satsuki cleared her throat and Aomine willed himself to relax.

He folded his hands together on the table and leaned forward. "My guild is more than capable of handling Fire Apparitions. Traps serve a singular purpose. They don't discriminate prey. They capture it. Which is exactly what we want." The tense atmosphere in the room dissolved and it appeared that he had everyone's attention. "We don't have enough military strength to launch an offensive just yet. As you so adamantly protested, Araki, we are a pacifistic race. We fight only when backed into a corner with nowhere to go but in the face of danger. Wouldn't you say that's where we find ourselves?"

A dry murmur echoed around the room. Directors leaned into each other, disclosures confidential and rushed. Wakamatsu deliberated to himself, arms crossed, and eyes sewn to the strewn papers before him. Most of Aomine's proposals unfolded similarly. He would offer a frank approach and await rejection as they whispered among each other.

Seconds turned to minutes and Aomine's skin crawled restlessly.

He glanced sidelong to Satsuki and caught her supportive smile.

He wanted it to mean something. That his motion would carry. That he would, for once, catch a break from this convoluted group of halfwits.

Unable to resist, he cracked a smile back.

"Alright," Wakamatsu called, gaining silence.
Aomine redirected his eyes and straightened his back.

"Though it pains me," he began and the pressure in Aomine's chest instantly lightens. "You make a logical assertion. We need to play more calculatingly if we want to avoid any patriotic, self-sacrificing types that squeeze through our defense. This board authorizes the motion. Inform your guild and report to the Dan."

Sparse irate groans and distant muttering filtered throughout the room as directors, officers, and Ambassadors, like Aomine, prepared their things to leave.

"We will meet again in one week to settle this collaboration, Aomine," Wakamatsu called over the noise.

A wave was all Aomine offered as he eagerly bounded for the door, slipping through a pair of disgruntled directors and entered the hall.

The sudden swell of success burst from him when he heard an airy summons to his left. He managed to keep a tight hold on his materials as he sidestepped the noise with a pert skip. A blur of pale blue and black entered his vision and he exhaled the tension.

Tetsu was a clash of saturation. His complexion was fair but his style of dress was always grim, forever cloaked in neutral, muted colors. Today he donned a black dress shirt, charcoal slacks, and combat boots. A pair of sweat bands peeked beneath rolled up sleeves. Aomine knew their significance and was respectful enough to ignore them.

"My apologies, Aomine-kun. I thought you remembered I would be waiting here."

Aomine fingered a file loose and whacked Tetsu square on the head. "Don't do that."

The numb of elation faded and his headache returned with affection. He rubbed his forehead, the folders tucked to his hip.

Tetsu ignored his scolding and offered a hand. Aomine mechanically deposited the thin stack and the two started down the hall, away from the clamor of the director's post-meeting debate.

"Off to the see the Dan?"

Though the feeling was fleeting, Aomine was still in good enough a mood to offer a smile. Tetsu rarely required a debriefing and his penchant to read people went unrivaled.

"It took a bout with Araki to get the green light," said Aomine as he pocketed his hands, mindful to keep in pace to Tetsu. He convinced himself that now that he'd won the war for once, there was no need to rush. It took a lot to convince the Dan to override a decision of the War Administrator. But the directors could try if they were so desperate.

Tetsu offered a light chuckle. "Did Momoi-san have to interfere again?"

"I had to do something."

They stopped and turned. Satsuki stood behind them, papers and a thick manual cradled to her ample bosom. A breathy jade dress fell to her knees, black stockings leading to a pair of tan quarter-inch heels. Gold trim ornamented the collar of her dress and streamed beside four emerald buttons. Her beauty had always been compared to that of spring. Amaranthine and refreshing. A century hadn't marred a single inch of her skin.
"Trying your famous Tetsu impression?" Aomine snorted without remorse.

"I have no such impression, Aomine-kun." Satsuki laughed at Tetsu's usual deadpan.

She cleaved a space between the two and the group continued down the hall. Cleaning staff, assistants, holy folk, and temple residents loitered among the passages of the fifth temple, its walls nearly naked. Any and all craftsmanship was advertised in the second temple along with the library and an auxiliary wing housing the medical lab where priests and priestesses were trained in contemporary apothecary practices.

They hook a right after threading through three nearly identical stretches of walkway. Accent lighting overtook the wider stretch of hall, cones of soft yellow cascading several stone statues carved from mountain rock of the nearby peaks. Wolves prowling snow-blanketed cliffs, howling to the pale moon, and others in the heat of killing a bulky elk complemented one wall. Aomine smiled at the symbolism. Wolves were creatures of the Ice. Royals and those of the upper tier had been awarded one to serve them since around the 6th century BCE where the familiar assisted with hunting game and balancing the battlefield. Delivering covert messages and companionship was their purpose now. They were loyal pack animals with an established hierarchy that dictated their society. Much like the Ice. The Elks, meanwhile, were subservient to the Fire. Temperamental forest prowlers, elks possessed an arrogance that led to hormonal-driven violence in the name of assertion. A trait the Fire was infamous for.

Aomine had never understood why the Fire decided to domesticate the elk until he was caught on the wrong side of a pair of antlers that gifted him with a three week reservation at the hospital and a ghostly white gash below his ribs.

They turned left to a lacquered staircase and climbed to the top. Only a pair of plain doublewide doors stood at the end of a shorter hallway, bleakly lit by florescent light strips pinned to the moldings.

Despite their orthodox nature, the Ice embraced electricity, among few modern technological achievements.

Satsuki approached and knocked.

A blurred voice beyond permitted them and one by one they filtered inside.

The room was intensely decorated. A marriage of east meets west. Brushwork paintings donned the walls portraying battle scenes, beautiful scenery, and wolves. Old-fashioned tatami mats covered the floor and a low tea-table centered the room. Two bookshelves guarded a delicately perched set of daggers and a large gilded mirror beyond the table. A faint aroma of mint and eucalyptus wafted through the room.

"Take a seat, all," the Dan said his voice thick with Kansai-ben.

The three slipped out of their shoes, made difficult for Aomine given that he wore boots. He soon joined Satsuki opposite the Dan. Tetsu sat some feet behind Aomine, hands on his thighs and face relaxed but stony.

Imayoshi Shouichi was a man of value and customs. Keeping friends close but enemies closer. His poker face carried a badge of expert duplicity. A wise man would know to take anything he said at face value. Despite his shady disposition, Imayoshi was an experienced leader, the only one within the last century capable of contending with Akashi Seijuuro. Others abdicated and vanished into obscurity or placated the man's every whim.
Aomine and Satsuki waited as Imayoshi's scrawling hand danced across the page, one of many in front of him. More reports needing approval and recognition, no doubt. A subtle ticking consumed the room.

Aomine's brows pinched, hands fisting his pants. He'd already had to sit through one mind-numbing silence today and he wasn't about to entertain a second.

The words left his mouth unfiltered. "Any day now, Imayoshi."

Satsuki groaned and Tetsu hissed in desperation behind him.

They were right.

That was stupid.

The Dan's face lifted eyes narrow beneath his rectangular spectacles.

Moments stretched on.

Sure, they were family. But the man didn't suffer fools.

Family ties be damned.

Imayoshi's sudden laugh disarmed him, relieving his tension like a deflating balloon. "You never were patient, Aomine. I do appreciate the lack of tantrums, though."

"Everyone grows up," he said, trying not to be sour.

The Dan shuffled the papers together, aligning them with a few hearty thumps against the tabletop. The contents were shoved to the side and he stood, smoothing out his robes. Satsuki cleared her throat and raised a hand in protest.

"No need, Dan," she called. "Tea is too much trouble for a simple report and delivery."

The Dan slipped his hands into the robe's wide sleeves, a hooked grin claiming his lips. Against Satsuki's wishes he turned and padded to the corner where a kettle sat steaming over an electric burner. He crouched and reached for a pale blue tea cup beside the burner.

"I'll accept your account of the meeting, Momoi-san. Thank you for your diligent efforts." In all their years together, Aomine couldn't acclimate himself to Imayoshi's sickly-sweet formalities.

Satsuki slid a handful of papers across the table and rolled to her feet, aligning her dress. She stepped into her shoes and slipped out of the door only after offering Imayoshi a parting bow.

The Dan returned to his seat and tabled the tea cup with a decisive clack. "Kuroko-kun, may you step outside? I'm certain you're already privy to the meeting's turnout."

Without retort to the obvious jab, Tetsu rose and left in the same motion as Satsuki.

Once the door clicked shut, Aomine said, "Jealous that you're not the only one with a keen eye, Imayoshi?"

The words were unguarded and a smirk followed.

Imayoshi's stern countenance crumbled as a humble smile graced his wicked mouth and the two erupted in friendly laughter.
"Impatient and impetuous." The Dan's voice calmed, throat soothed with a sip from his cup. "Why allow him to hear what he already knows?"

Point taken.

Aomine flicked a stray bead of moisture from his eye and slouched. The air of familiarity would allow it now that it was just the two of them.

Though, forcing blood to his already aggravated brain reminded him of his menacing headache. He palmed his forehead but the marginal difference of temperature wasn't enough to allay the bothersome thumping.

Imayoshi sidled to the kettle and produced a cup for Aomine. "I thought you learned your alcohol tolerance twenty years ago."

"I stopped drinking religiously twenty years ago."

A dipsomaniac, he was not. An appreciator of fine liquors and a night of forgiven negligence to responsibility, he once was. Drinking revived unfriendly memories.

He bargained with the steady drumming of his head as Imayoshi prepared him a suitable remedy. "Wakamatsu actually overrode Araki."

"That's rare. She's ballsier than most on his board." The Dan's solecism was reassuring.

"That's probably because she's got 'em." It was hard not to laugh at his own joke and his brain thumped hard for good measure.

Imayoshi seated himself again and tenderly set the cup in front of Aomine along with a single pill. He pitched the pill in his mouth and tipped the cup against his lips to down it.

"He's authorized me to utilize my guild to set border traps to catch whatever rats manage to weasel through our barriers. I have plenty to dispatch even though all of them wouldn't hesitate to offer their availability. I'm to meet again with the board in the week to set up a collaborative offensive with the chief." Wakamatsu may not have disclosed it, but Aomine knew well enough how the eccentric's brain worked. When you spent enough hours of the day needling the man just for pleasure, idiosyncrasies revealed themselves.

"Much less barbaric than your past proposals," Imayoshi replied over the visor of his cup. "Why couldn't you have made it this easy to handle you as a child?"

Aomine snickered almost vindictively, briefly recalling his petulant resistance in his younger years. Not going to bed on time, shooing away attendants who tried to usher him to bathe or dress, and stealing food from the kitchen afterhours. His proudest achievement was participating in the hunter's guild entrance exams. Imayoshi had quarantined Aomine in his room and detailed a contingent of guards to keep him withdrawn. His escape was guaranteed after sliding a licentious piece of erotica—one he'd secured from his confiscated stash—through a crack in the sliding door. A quiet hop out the window and experienced trekking through the surrounding greenery led him to the guild headquarters. He passed with flying colors, which did not go unannounced to Imayoshi.

The punishment, though severe, was entirely worth it.

Considering that Aomine now headed the guild.

"It wouldn't have been fun that way."
Imayoshi seemed to register Aomine's moment of nostalgia and his face softened. His fingers daintily cradled his cup.

"Your parents would have been proud of you."

The words, rarely spoken, hit hard.

Aomine winced, gaze falling to his murky reflection.

He never knew his parents. According to Imayoshi, they met their fate to war. He was told that they weren't considered influential people in the Apparition world. His mother was a priestess who fell out of favor with many due to her crass indifference to tradition. She met his father, a government official, and the two disappeared to evade the public eye. But they were exactly the types to fall on the blade. Innocents that only whispered their dissentions yet still withheld intrinsic patriotism. Ones that were targeted by the thousands just to prove a political point and force surrender. The thought made Aomine's blood boil. He had always wanted to learn the character of his parents. Had they been good people? What were their hobbies? Did they even want a child?

They were Ice folk, as Imayoshi had told him, dark skinned, haired, and eyed. Just like Aomine. Even at one hundred years old, Aomine would reserve time on sleepless nights and think about his parents. If one asked, Aomine would say with certainty that Imayoshi was the only family Aomine had. And he'd loved the Dan like a father. He raised him to be intuitive, quick-witted, and decisive. Of all the studies Aomine labored to achieve, there was only one he could not grasp. And the pain followed him every day of his life.

He could not wield ice.

A birth defect, Imayoshi told him.

Ugly envy sprouted as he'd watched other children utilize their nature-given gift. Producing beautiful flurries that graced the winds. Conjuring sheets of frost that glistened off their flesh. Embracing the world around them in a freezing wisp of ice. Connecting with the very essence of their births. To be an Apparition was to be Ice. Or Fire. Or the Shadows. The dire realization that Aomine was an Apparition yet at the same time not burdened him. It compelled him to exercise greater effort to be taken seriously by those around him. He refused to be a pity case and a source of gossip.

He'd heard it in the halls most of his life.

What if he's lying?

A birth defect that rare would have been documented and researched. Surely Dan Imayoshi is lying for his benefit.

He's got to be a Neutral.

His jaw clenched.

The very word spiked his blood pressure.

A deceitful lot, they were.

A product of poor Apparition breeding, Neutrals were Apparitions who lacked the ability to utilize their inherited power, much like Aomine. Birthed from a hybrid and pureblood Apparition, Neutrals were theorized to be genetic waste, withholding their parents' powerful genes to be
squandered with their inability to produce legitimate offspring. Every recording in history noted that Neutrals possessed black hair and eyes. Surely they stood out among the Wind and Earth, inferior Apparitions like the Ice. The denomination was coined by the arrogant Fire and Lightning Apparitions nearly ten thousand years ago, or so history dictates.

The Ice was *not* inferior. They were patient and attacked methodically. Not in a whirlwind of untamed violence.

Faint warmth to his hand broke the spell of concentration clouding Aomine's senses.

"You know what you are. Apparition heritage, in light of your other successes, means nothing," he said and Aomine straightened. "You've my authorization to punish them. With non-lethal means."

Aomine smiled at the hasty correction and shook his head. "That's not necessary. Feigning indifference allows me to practice self-restraint. No form of my punishment is non-lethal, Imayoshi." He brought the cup to his lips and swallowed the rest of the now lukewarm tea. "It wasn't how you taught me."

Imayoshi laughed and firmed his posture as well. He set the cup aside and reached for Satsuki's report.

Aomine intercepted the signal and rose. "Summon me if you need anything."

A familiar smirk hooked the Dan's mouth as the papers were observed. "Absolutely."
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“No,” he finally said after a stretched silence. “This one’s on us both. Don’t invalidate my responsibility, either, Satsuki.”

Seeing the hurt still struggling to surface, he sighed and opened his arms.

Satsuki’s thin brows creased and her lips pursed. Stiff shoulders unhinged and a mild sob spilled from her mouth. She clapped her hand over her mouth and turned to him.

“You’re too tall.” A timid laugh bubbled between her choked words.

But he stooped to her level and allowed her to relieve herself.

The walk from the Dan’s office taxed Aomine’s mind. It had been a while since he relived the thought of his parents. It was bitter and in no way sweet. His own failure to produce a family stung deep and he spent the last fifty years of his life convincing himself that it wasn’t meant to be. Surely Imayoshi would accept that. So far he had left the matter alone.

Aomine retraced his steps to the hall of lupine statues and found his eyes looking not at them, but at the even larger effigy across the way. It was wider than it was taller. A woman lying on her side, belly firm and round with expectant life. Etched upon it were six little children, all clamoring within their shared womb. One was on fire. Another with sharp, static edges. A third was hatched with gentle strokes, as if shaded. The fourth was being blown away. The fifth sported a leafy wig with stick-like protrusions. And the sixth was faceted, like a crystal.

Mother Nature. Birth mother to the Apparitions.

An old story, told six different ways.

“This is the first time I’ve seen you stop to admire her.”

The voice was instantly familiar and Aomine was too clouded in thought to be surprised. A grunt was all he offered.

“She’s been drawn so many different ways,” she said softly, as if to be mindful of passersby despite the emptiness of the hall. “In each rendition, though, she’s always expecting.”

He turned from the statue, eyes drawn to Satsuki.

She was pinching her left ring finger. Her expression pained.

The old-age guilt festered.

It squeezed his chest and scratched its way up his throat until he couldn’t stop it.

“I’m sorry, Satsuki.”

She winced and he cursed himself.
“You know it wasn't your fault.” She forced a small laugh and folded her hands behind her back. “All a man determines is the sex, right? If the child doesn't live, it's the mother’s responsibility to shoulder.”

He didn’t like that she did this.

Hypocritical of him, he knew.

But Satsuki tried. Three separate times.

Each was a failure.

In their youth, Aomine had come of age. It was tradition among the Ice that men marry and father children once they turn thirty—young, in comparison to their almost three-hundred-year lifespans. Most waited another thirty years. The tradition came into effect in more medieval times, when life was lost more frequently to war. Imayoshi considered Aomine’s lack of romantic interest in several of the women he’d courted and, upon reflection, suggested a trustworthy woman to bear children.

Momoi Satsuki.

The pair was inseparable since their meeting as near-infants. There was deep understanding, respect, and love between them, even though Imayoshi recognized the difference between familial and romantic love. Aomine was resistant at the start, as he hadn’t outgrown his rebellious phase. Satsuki showed similar hesitation, not wanting to risk damaging their relationship. But the Ice’s doctrine was strict on just how many liberties women had. True, she could have refused to marry. But once vows were exchanged, a woman was to follow her husband’s will.

In the end, they were married.

The union lasted twenty years. Aomine couldn’t say it was a drastically life-altering decision, as few things between them were different. Being married to your best friend meant you had reservations to their body. But that wasn’t what Aomine enjoyed about their marriage.

It was having someone to come home to.

It was having someone who worried about your problems.

It was having family.

Three times within their twenty years together, they tried to bear a child. The pregnancies had gone full term, and each time Aomine had been there to support Satsuki. She had made all three deliveries. The babies, however, only lived to be around a week old. Not long enough to be awarded a name by his or her new parents.

The first time, she was convinced that some infants presented complications post-birth.

The second time, she was hesitant to accept the truth and blamed herself.

The third time, she disappeared from home. Aomine had found her after an extensive search through the dense woods surrounding the temple grounds. She was huddled in front of a nondescript grave. He eased beside her and noticed a porcelain vase clutched to her chest. The cremated remains of their third child, dead after only three days.

He hadn’t known she buried them, but he told himself not to feel shafted. After all, he could never fathom a mother’s sorrow.
They remained together for little under a year before they decided a divorce was in order. Their union was not one of love, but security.

The matter was buried and their relationship as friends has remained otherwise unmarred.

Aomine tipped his gaze down to his left hand. A lackluster band adorned his ring finger, virtually untouched since their separation.

He’d tried to will himself to remove it.

But it just wasn't possible.

The last physical reminder of the family he seemed destined not to deserve.

“No,” he finally said after a stretched silence. “This one’s on us both. Don’t invalidate my responsibility, either, Satsuki.”

Seeing the hurt still struggling to surface, he sighed and opened his arms.

Satsuki’s thin brows creased and her lips pursed. Stiff shoulders unhinged and a mild sob spilled from her mouth. She clapped her hand over her mouth and turned to him.

“You’re too tall.” A timid laugh bubbled between her choked words.

But he stooped to her level and allowed her to relieve herself.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“Please recall Aomine-kun from this morning’s hunt.”

What he heard was a demand, not a request.

He squinted appraisingly. “Your reason?”

Kuroko remained passive and eerily composed. “I saw an elk in the forest.”

Hardly ever had the shadow’s keen senses been wrong. True, Imayoshi didn’t like sharing such a fine talent with one from the Shadow.

Yet, an elk?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Imayoshi perused Momoi’s account of the meeting with mild interest, following a relaxing breakfast of fried fish, rice, miso, and picked vegetables. She was diligent to the point of officious. He discarded the papers in favor of Wakamatsu’s report, cumulative data from his scouts’ perimeter reconnaissance, troop expenses, and individual filings from each of his five directors. He estimated the gravity of the situation with Lord Akashi was reaching critical mass. Honestly, he expected the man to have made a move months ago following an incident where Ice villagers publically executed a handful of Fire Apparitions arrested for murdering a family foraging along the borderline.

Lord Akashi hadn’t liked the sudden motion, sanctioned without contacting him first, as protocol required.

But murder was murder and capital punishment was the consequence.

The Fire was no less quick to draw the blade against the convicted.

In this particular region, the Fire and Ice once again shared a border. The last time had been eons ago, while the two were still under one constitution. Border conflicts were an everyday occurrence and having to contact Akashi everyday to placate the persistent racism-induced beleaguering strained his nerves. Unless border-traipsing dignitaries crossed paths with the hunter’s guild, then he and the Lord had nothing to discuss.

He retrieved another stack of papers. The script was lazily written with a familiar hand. What Aomine made up for in competence he lacked in patience. The pen work was hardly legible, even to Imayoshi’s schooled eyes. Through dedication he translated the pages with cursory sweeps. Standard procedure. Within the report contained a detail of trap and weapon inventory, the status of POWs, and catalogued game captured and preserved for meals, textile, and medicine. The last page of Aomine’s contribution was abused with abundant crinkles and daubed with soil, what he hoped
was water, and dried blood.

As all prior submissions had been.

A checklist of terminated Neutrals. At least a good dozen for this month. More than usual.

Imayoshi smirked at Aomine’s productivity.

“Did well, did he?” The new voice piqued his attention.

An undefined blob bubbled from a gloomy corner in the dimly lit room. The darkness faded to reveal a tall figure cloaked in muted colors. Sun-kissed skin shone only above the collar of a leather jacket. The gleam of a watch captured a weak shimmer. Flat-bottomed sneakers cushioned his steps as the figure neared.

Imayoshi separated the mutilated sheet from the otherwise perfect stack. “Uncharacteristically so, yes.”

Susa Yoshinori took the proffered sheet. A bulky envelope was lobbed unceremoniously to the table following a glance over of Aomine’s recent itinerary.

The man said little until business was completed. Which suited him fine.

Susa was a man Imayoshi wanted in the foxhole with him when things got hairy. Critical, objective, and sharp-witted, Susa got the results the Dan wanted and more. The Shadow Apparition served him in other ways, including an active conduit to correspondences between Lord Akashi Seijuurou and Kaizer Hyyuga Junpei. An adjunct line of communication to Czar Nakatani Masaaki of the Shadow was a welcome bonus.

A quick probing in the envelope satisfied Imayoshi. Currency traded for satisfying yet another contract. To be dispensed to Aomine’s contingent later.

“I hear Akashi’s at the end of his rope,” Susa said, carelessly folding the paper and stuffing it into his pocket.

“Is that the truth or are you needling for an explanation?”

Silence and a subtle smirk was his answer.

Imayoshi reached for an innocuous book among the organized clutter of the tea-table and opened the cover to reveal a remote tucked into appropriately carved pages. Susa shuffled to the mirror and unhinged it from the wall. A clutch of monitors beaded from a recess in the wall. The two attended to the raspy images produced by the remote trigger.

Surveillance was traditionally conducted by a patrol squad under Wakamatsu’s charge. However once Imayoshi was sworn to the temple throne, the infallibility of national security dropped enough to encourage a bit of extra protection. The installation was and would continue to be withheld from the public. The imminent scandal would ruin his reputation as an honest sovereign with complete faith in his supporting administrators.

Only choice feeds were transmitted.

The lobby of the hunter’s guild. Aomine’s chamber. Kuroko’s barracks. The hall leading to his office. To name a few.
“So which is it, Susa?” Imayoshi probed, studying each screen for problems.

“Akashi’s been talking to Hyuuga about providing support for an invasion.” The answer is swift and curt.

He groaned and slid his glasses down his nose. Fingertips massaged the pits of his eyes.

That was the last thing he needed. Not that he hadn’t been anticipating the gesture.

The Rus-Ainu Pact of 1000 CE was the worst thing to happen to the Apparition world. A political alliance between the Lightning and Fire Apparition tribes. Thousands of years of feral warfare led to one conclusion. Too similar in nature and nearly equal in strength, the then-rulers of the tribes deduced that neither would be blessed with victory. Only genocide. Which sat well with no one. A settlement was easily reached and the tribes assimilated into mighty kingdoms and with capital power. To instigate the Fire was tantamount to aggressing the Lightning. The Ice was intimately aware of the effects of the partnership—when accosted, one hardly acted without the other. It was a darker phase in the kingdom’s history. The Ice had both earned an enemy and lost its allies. The Lightning was at its largest then and ravenously annexed neighboring land by the acre through guerilla tactics and unrestrained collateral damage.

The Shadow suffered the greatest blow.

The Wind faced an instant threat of usurpation and systematic population control as the Lightning’s most hated enemy. A natural disharmony of the elements. The King and Queen—Rey and Reina—failed to elicit the Ice’s assistance, as the Dan suffered losses from not only the northern and southern lands, but the seas. Negligence warranted the Mother’s Republic Treaty, dissolving the Ice’s relationship to the Wind, and Earth by association as the two were a package deal.

Times had been difficult since then. Even after the Wolf Pack Pact Imayoshi begrudgingly acquiesced to sixteen years ago. Outlined, were terms that significantly abolished the Ice’s military, something that thoroughly outraged him.

If Akashi was in talks with Hyuuga, Imayoshi’s outlook wasn’t so promising.

Whereas the Lord’s aggression was calculated with a sickening calm, Hyuuga did not hesitate to unleash the fury of his army’s strength.

To have the two of them knocking on his door spelled absolute devastation.

Which is why he needed to maneuver carefully.

“Moving faster than I anticipated,” Imayoshi said. His eyes locked on the screen displaying the guild’s lobby. Hunters milled about heaving boxes laden with equipment off screen. He spotted Aomine passing under the camera’s gaze, disappearing into the barracks. He had yet to see Kuroko.

Which was a problem.

He needed to wrap this meeting up. Susa could not be compromised.

“Do some damage control with the border discrepancies,” the man advised. “And mind your manners at the summit this week.”

The implication stung.
“Hardly enough to reverse the incurred damage,” he scoffed affixing his glasses properly. “Exacerbated by him and his unruly band of…”

A blur caught his eye on the monitor observing the hallway outside his office. He jumped to his feet with trained stealth and returned the mirror to its perch. Susa expertly glided to the dark corner and dissolved into the blackness as if he’d never existed. The remote was deposited to its nook as he sucked a breath to compose himself.

Damn Kuroko Tetsuya.

“I don’t appreciate the skulking, Kuroko-kun.”

The door creaked open.

The shadow entered appropriately and stood at attention before the tea-table, waiting until Imayoshi settled before speaking. “My apologies.”

“How can I help you?”

“Please recall Aomine-kun from this morning’s hunt.”

What he heard was a demand, not a request.

He squinted appraisingly. “Your reason?”

Kuroko remained passive and eerily composed. “I saw an elk in the forest.”

Hardly ever had the shadow’s keen senses been wrong. True, Imayoshi didn’t like sharing such a fine talent with one from the Shadow.

Yet, an elk?

He repressed a groan. Another unwelcome cog in his plans.

Thinking quickly, he asked, “Are you sure it wasn’t a deer?”

The irate tweak in the otherwise stiff shadow’s brow was satisfying.

“Similar family and size. Easily misconstrued in the fog.”

“Nigou doesn’t confuse prey with enemies.” Kuroko was quick to cushion his sharp rebuttal by adding, “I recognized the animal’s girth, Dan. Too thick to be a deer.”

This was unpleasant. So he decided on a different avenue to discharge Kuroko from his sight.

“Not certain you could handle the threat, Kuroko-kun?” he said. “Having spotted an elk means that one from the upper echelons of the Fire Kingdom has transgressed our border. Will there be a problem offering your services?”

His last line was delivered with conviction. He steepled his fingers and leaned expectantly forward, awaiting Kuroko’s retort.

So he continued.

“Certain you aren’t jealous that someone else has laid stake to your claim? After all, you weren’t so successful in attempting to assassinate Aomine and now that he’s warmed up to you, it wouldn’t be
much of a challenge to act now.” If Kuroko was accepting the bait, Imayoshi couldn’t be sure as the shadow’s face was rigid.

He decided to get straight to the point. “You will do what you are contracted to do. Should your loyalty fail you,” he gestured to the leather collar shielded by Kuroko’s shirt. Insurance guaranteed to electrocute the sprat within an inch of life at the touch of a button always on Aomine’s person. “You’ll be promptly eliminated.”

Kuroko’s porcelain mask of indifference cracked, mouth tightening. He bowed his head in understanding.

Imayoshi reached for the collection of strewn papers.

A whisk of air. Then a hefty thunk to the floor.

His eyes found a dagger embedded deep into the tatami of the darkened corner.

Affronted, Imayoshi searched for Kuroko.

He was gone, the door to the office ajar.

“Wretched little…” his incurred temper overtook his voice.

Susa reappeared from the corner, crawling from the shadows as if surfacing from a hole. He palmed the dagger.

“Tugging hard on the leash, that one.”

He said nothing.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter lengths are annoyingly indefinite, gomen.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

“No.”

His brow cocked. “Excuse me?”

Akashi’s brows tightened, peering over the sheet. “I cannot allow this.”

Kagami swiped the sheet back with such aggression it wrinkled. “I’m a big boy, Akashi.”

“Seijuurou.”

He left the scolding alone. For now. Fifteen years his senior and with a mother complex. Or father. But a complex nonetheless.

Chapter Notes

The formatting looks a little offset later in the chapter. It's intentional.

Kuroko sat in the hunter’s guild barracks. The interior was plain. Planks of timber sheathed the walls and ceiling of the large rectangular room. Wall sconces allowed adequate lighting after sundown. Half a dozen windows opened on one wall as the only source of natural light. Walkways formed a grid pattern between platforms blanketed with futons that overlaps to display a sea of white where Aomine’s men slept.

Conversation floated through the expanse as the men assigned to pursue and gather trapped game donned their gear. Some development was necessary to design the uniform. Printed in the varied green palate of the surrounding vegetation, the material was thick enough to resist weathering. Simple pockets adorned the three-quarter sleeves, which left arm flexibility unrestricted. Thick leather backed by a steel plate was sewn into the chest and thighs of straight-legged cargos. Potent enough to deflect the grunt of the blade and the aggression of forest beasts. Boots sheathed the feet and gloves, the hands. Since its evolution, fewer casualties were suffered in the field.

His vestments were similar in protection as the technology was borrowed from the Shadow.

But he couldn’t be bothered to indulge his pride.

His mind churned from the discussion with the Dan.

Something was amiss.

It wasn’t the first time Imayoshi attacked him about his failed attempt to terminate Aomine. Despite what the Dan perceived, Kuroko harbored no ill intentions. The shame of capture and indefinite servitude allowed him to live another day. Another week. Another thirty-four years.
Though it had resulted from the Dan’s admission, his life was indebted only to Aomine. There was no animosity disguised as conciliation between them. Instead a simple partnership that gave Kuroko life, a job, a home, and a shared pet.

A burly malamute sat with gargoyle stiffness at his feet. Only its ears moved, motioning to follow the swarm of noises.

Aomine was the first dignitary in the last millennium to possess a familiar that was not a wolf. Found as a pup under the predatory glint of a ravenous fox, Aomine nursed the dog back to health with Momoi’s assistance. Characterized with a white face mask and fair eyes that seemed unreadable, Aomine settled on the name Tetsuya Nigou—Tetsuya number two, punctuated to Nigou. Training was Kuroko’s jurisdiction. Today, the malamute served the purposes of companionship, hunting fowl, and transporting carts of the guild’s goods.

Even with the dog’s large size, he was nothing Kuroko couldn’t handle.

He hoped today fared well.

The hunt was the most vulnerable Aomine would ever be when not bathing. Even while sleeping and eating, Kuroko or Nigou were on guard.

Yet it was what had sealed his fate thirty-four years ago, and so many more before him. But he hadn’t the time to reminisce and mourn the loss of fellow assassins as a loud noise reached him.

A booming voice entered the barracks.

Kuroko opened his ears and cast a wary eye.

Nigou followed suit.

A brick wall of a man sauntered through the portal. Dark hair cropped tight against his scalp and a disciplined face gave a militant look. A white tank top contrasted his burnt skin. The hearty beat of his boots on the wood cleared the way for him without a word spoken.

And Aomine fell into his path.

“Aomine,” the man called again, voice gruff and baritone.

His charge fastened a belt around his hips and locked eyes with Combat Squad chief Nebuya Eikichi.

Tree trunk-like arms folded across the chief’s ribs and a mutually undesirable smugness curled his mouth. “How’s the hangover?”

Aomine absorbed the taunt and plopped on a nearby platform, stooping to lace his boots.

“A marginal compared to my shoulder, dick.” The insult was blunted with familiarity but his charge’s eyes held enmity.

Nebuya shrugged. “I’ve been telling you to drop it. You’re too scrawny to best me. Just accept it.”

Impatient with the struggle of the laces, Aomine wrapped them around his calves and stood to face the chief. Kuroko thought to intervene but wouldn’t risk impugning Aomine’s pride. The man could be melancholy and downright sour when he was doted on.

Nothing Kuroko was prepared to shoulder.
“Still lithe enough to out-maneuver you on the mat, Nebuya.” Aomine adjusted his upturned collar and his lips peeled an arrogant grin. “Schedule me in for a match this week. We’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

The chief’s thin brows sloped.

“I got the okay from Wakamatsu. This week you and your pack of bears will be cooperating with me to dispel those annoying flies at the border. Wouldn’t hurt to work my muscles some and uproot your gigantic ass in front of your confederates.”

The barb achieved the desired effect and Nebuya sputtered angrily as Aomine glanced to a watch strapped to his wrist.

Aomine summoned the attention of assigned hunters and by the pair the room emptied. He passed the still flustered chief and called for Kuroko.

Nigou popped to all fours and trotted the walkway.

Kuroko followed, sparing Nebuya a cursory glance upon passing and slipped the portal.

—

Kagami Taiga’s bones tingled with familiar excitement.

Passing the border into Ice Apparition territory had been relatively effortless, an avenue carved through the efforts of several impassioned Fire Apparitions eager to placate the Lord’s ever-growing agitation. The sacrifices were many but such was the demand of conflict. Not that Kagami accepted it wholeheartedly. But he’d rather approach the reality pragmatically. Miles of verdant brush had been cleared in the yawning hours of the early morning. Jagged mountain terrain hadn’t proved difficult for his elk to surpass, the creature skillfully bounding over fissures and ridges in elegant prances worthy of poetry.

His internal clock told him that the journey consumed nearly five hours and that it was two hours short of midday. He looked through the tufts of the towering pines to seek the sun for confirmation. But the clouds had yet to yield to the brilliant shine.

Kagami surveyed his surroundings and identified another tripwire.

Eleven of the devices already lay disarmed in his pouch to avoid being reinstalled upon discovery. Skilled ease deactivated and fulfilled the dozen.

He edged closer, keeping his core tight to mute his approach. Using the elk this far in would draw suspicion so he turned it loose a good mile back to be summoned again with a sharp designated whistle. It was a ways until the loom of the temples came into view. A scout related that an hour and a half trek more would reveal the bleary vestige of the Ice’s principal settlement. Kagami estimated another hour would land him at the star’s southeastern point—the fifth finger or fifth point, as it was denoted.

Though his nerves were alive and firing, an indolent aftertaste followed each practiced breath. Humidity and Kagami did not mix. Not necessarily Fire Apparition repellant, but it afflicted him with a languid and tired feeling.
He needed to revitalize his energies.

With expert motion he scaled a sturdy birch and nestled his spine against the trunk fifty feet off the ground. From the thigh pocket of his cargo pants he produced a neatly folded sheet tattooed with a savage crinkle to one half. A monochrome headshot and profile at the top right corner depicted a swarthy-skinned man, appearing no older than one hundred. Dark hair, a strong jaw, and menacingly narrow lackluster eyes. Information below introduced the man.

Subject is one Aomine Daiki

Height at one hundred ninety-two centimeters

Weight between eighty to eighty-five kilograms

THREAT LEVEL 1—Immediate termination required. EXERCISE EXTREME CAUTION

Observations: Subject possesses a familiar; Malamute dog, estimated forty kilograms. Breast and throat guarded by a specialized anti-assault harness. A shadow accompanies the Subject. Registered pale blue hair and eyes; appears frail in stature but proven lethal in force

Recommendations: The Subject specializes in close combat techniques to disarm, redirect, and incapacitate aggressors. Noted as quick on his feet. Capable of performing perfunctory motions that appear random

His brow creased as the words hardened his bearings. It had taken some insistence to acquire the contract and concern came from unwanted angles. The list of names signed under the disclaimer only fortified his ambition. His name was among them, on the back of the sheet near the far bottom corner. Everyone before him had lost their lives to Aomine Daiki, assassins from all three Shadow Apparition charters.

Would he be next? Another accolade for the bastard to tack on his wall of accomplishments?

A recent conference, just hours ago, resurfaced in his mind.

Kagami donned his protective gear. A fitting long-sleeved shirt squeezed his middle beneath a vest padded with suitable protection. Dull green cargos sheathed his thighs and sturdy hiking boots gripped his feet. He looked to the layout of accessories strewn across the duvet of his western-styled bed.

A handful of throwing knives, brass knuckles, caltrops, and piano wire.

His trademark rested above the lot.

A short-bladed sword, the kodachi. Typically used in pairs, Kagami preferred to utilize a solo blade, so as to disarm an enemy and grapple them into submission with his available hand. Several superficial grooves glimmered off the blade’s surface by way of a candle on the nearby desktop.
Tallies. For the Neutrals eliminated thus far. Kagami wasn’t vain enough to advertise his accomplishments to anyone but himself. A reminder to maintain his efforts, more like.

He went to work sheathing sharpened edges into holsters and threaded a belt through his pant loops.

A knock on the door, followed but a dulcet voice, surprised him.

Akashi Seijuurou slid inside without admittance.

Kagami cast a glance out the partially drawn curtains. Indigo hugged the edge of the trees and mountains, chasing away the night. Too early for his brother to be awake.

Well, half-brother.

“In a hurry, Taiga?”

He ignored the inquisition. “You’re overly eager to meet the sun.”

Akashi’s heterochromatic stare burned the back of his neck but he didn’t turn or rescind his barb. Unlike Kagami, who spent nearly all of his time outdoors, a contrasting pallor hued his brother’s skin. Even more of a reminder that the two were so vastly different.

The belt was secured and holsters attached to accessible holes.

“Hand it over.”

Kagami threw him an incredulous stare. He knew what his brother wanted but wasn’t keen on involving Akashi in his business.

They weren’t estranged by any means. But the pair waded in opposite ends of the pool of social hierarchy. Akashi maintained the nation, enveloped himself in the complicated verse of government, and remained available at all times within the castle. Kagami, in contrast, entertained himself with intense athleticism, offering help to the community beyond castle walls, and kept himself so busy juggling obligations and recreation that it was hard to keep track of him.

His furtive Neutral hunting activities hadn’t gone without his brother’s notice. Akashi had confirmed that it was Kagami’s way of assisting the nation, protecting their culture. Though he was quick to protest contracts delineated with a threat assessment of two or higher—the closer to one, the greater the risk.

Akashi didn’t ask twice. He simply held out his hand, fingers beckoning compliance.

Begrudgingly Kagami swiped the page from the desk a stride and a half away and passed it over. He studied the calculating shift of his brother’s eyes across the page.

“No.”

His brow cocked. “Excuse me?”

Akashi’s brows tightened, peering over the sheet. “I cannot allow this.”

Kagami swiped the sheet back with such aggression it wrinkled. “I’m a big boy, Akashi.”

“Seijuurou.”
He left the scolding alone. For now. Fifteen years his senior and with a mother complex. Or father. But a complex nonetheless.

“This ain’t my first rodeo,” he insisted, burrowing the sheet into the pocket of his cargos.

“Your impudence is going to get you killed, Taiga. Rethink this.”

“Then dance at my funeral pyre.” Tightness gripped his throat.

He stalked past his brother to the doorway.

“Taiga.”

Against his judgment, he stopped. And waited.

“Mist is a siren.” The response followed a mild silence. “Don’t let her seduce you.”

Kagami scoffed and left.

Though it sounded cryptic at first, Kagami realized his brother’s hidden message. You’re at a disadvantage. Think before you act. He may not have had a handle on politics, but he recognized the egregious situation in which the world was currently in. Responsibility was what brought him to observe his brother’s meetings with the cabinet.

The Xia Union was the center of it all.

Thousands of years ago, estimated around 2000 BCE, the tribes of Fire and Ice acquiesced to combine their efforts and formulate a joint civilization in what is now China. Their joining was known as the Xia Union, inspired by the rise of the Xia Dynasty in a remote location snuggled between Henan and Shanxi. Their differences were obvious from the start. Polar opposites in nature, the tribes developed separate senses of social conduct, government, gender roles, and justice. Civil war shattered the relationship and centuries were wasted trying to mend that which was irreparable. The Fire wanted to expel the Ice and vice versa. Both tribes had their eyes on the same prize. An archipelago to the East, uncultivated and pristine.

An intense conflagration spanned a good three thousand years before an agreement was reached.

The Fire had been reluctant to negotiate as the Fire intended to claim the Japanese Islands and the entirety of China halfway through the war. Bargaining issued that, in lieu of further bloodshed, the two tribes were better off an ocean apart with a peninsula to separate them. The arrangement had proven beneficial in evolving the simple tribes into pulsing kingdoms. But animosity ran deep. The Fire was greedy. Japan offered little to be desired. But more was always better and China’s vast natural wilderness was a sultry temptress that the Fire could not ignore.

Following the dissolution of the Xia Union in 1000 CE, the Fire sailed west and set up shop after clearing a path in a fiery maelstrom. The defense perpetuated by the Ice proved difficult to weaken and the Fire called upon their new allies of Eurasia, an empire spanning six-point-six million square miles with one third of the terrain remotely livable at the time. The Lightning in Russia. A pale race of extremists who took what they wanted with decisive action. The Kaizer— their sovereign—was more than amicable at the mention of war with the Ice. Anything to increase their borders and resources was a welcome invitation to the Lightning.

A two-way front was endorsed and effectively shrunk the rim of the Ice’s hold to the northwest
nook, a map of jagged peaks and copious forests. The majority of China was once again in the Fire’s clutches and the Ice successfully pigeonholed. Offenses continued irregularly when embittered Apparitions acted on spurious patriotic urges. Despite their confinement, the Ice migrated the world to expand their empire and found arable remoteness in the Americas where a secondary capital was installed. Many had seen it as an act of fatalism from the then Dan’s weak conscience. And it aggravated the Fire’s competitive spirit.

As expected, the Ice’s dormant rebellion was reignited, encouraged by the tenure of Dan Imayoshi, elected after the prior was forced to retire his claim following public outrage.

It wasn’t until the 1990s that a peace accord was reached. Albeit one that disadvantaged the Ice.

*A date with the noose*, as Imayoshi so eloquently phrased it.

Their military was disassembled and any and all future hostilities quelled with the threat of immediate foreign occupation. The Dan had been fighting the motion silently with what Akashi considered petty insolence. Though Kagami’s people weren’t saintly—massacring Ice villagers within a five hundred-foot margin of the borders—Imayoshi made no excuses or apologies for the cruel capital punishment carried out by vengeful comrades. The Dan had no auxiliary support to execute covert operations to gain an upper hand in the east. The cornered fox was bearing his teeth and raring to bite. The question was when and where.

The solution lay in the north. With Kaizer Hyuuga.

Speculation and intelligence reports were all Hyuuga and Akashi had to assess the situation. And it appeared imminent that Imayoshi was preparing for an offensive not against the Fire, but the Lightning. The Fire held the advantage in strength against the Ice and lacked adequate bodies to abate the impending offensive. The Lighting possessed a marginal effect. The coming days would confirm the course of action and Kagami was eager to hear it.

Which meant he had to conduct himself with professional ease and neutralize Aomine Daiki.

He doubted the man’s death would provide a catalyst to weaken the Ice.

But the man was a Neutral—wasted space—and a serial killer responsible for the death of five A-grade Shadow assassins of the Fire Apparition charter.

Aomine needed to die.

His resolve was fortified and he pocketed the sheet once again. Kagami scanned the geography to find no changes.

He descended the tree and advanced.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“I saw an elk this morning, Aomine-kun.”

An uneasy weight settled deep in his gut. Lucrative but not always worth the trouble. If his scar was any indication.

“We need deer, not elk.” He palmed his neck and turned to continue on.

Tetsu grabbed his shirt.

Odd. He was hardly ever this cagey.

He glanced to Nigou and saw similar apprehension in the malamute’s eyes.

Silently he blessed the two of them and their instincts.

Chapter Notes

I appreciate the attention this has gotten since I started posting it. It means a lot : )

Aomine remained crouched in the shady confines of a tall pine, still and unmoving. The static of his earpiece whispered to him as he awaited confirmation from his confederates on the results of their overnight traps. His nerves danced with anticipation, hardly quelled by the phantom presence of Tetsu who perched himself on a branch over Aomine’s head. The only reassurance he got was an occasional crunch of the shadow’s boots against the bark.

His men were responsible for tending the traps, dispersing through the thickets to verify kills both beast and Neutral.

He didn’t think it possible, but some of the bastards were actually stupid enough to become ensnared and caught alive. Poor judgment on their part, but a great bounty for Aomine and his crew. As head of the guild, Aomine reserved the right to not only terminate live-captured Neutrals, but conduct the hunt for fresh game.

Which he could only do once he received the total overnight yield.

He studied the area as he waited.

Calm and eerie. The fog hung low, allowing for a maximum visibility of around one hundred and fifty feet, or so he estimated. It had been at least an hour since the hunt commenced and it felt close to noon. Though Aomine wasn’t any good at judging time.

Hence Tetsu’s routine wake-up calls.
The feed in his ear crackled and his hand zoomed to concentrate the noise.

"Clutch one," a low voice. "A dozen fowl, three deer, and four foxes."

About average. He registered the amount and waited for subsequent news, which came a moment later.

“Clutch two, one moose and one pheasant.”

Not horrible, but not great.

Further correspondences flowed through and Aomine calculated the final tally. Though a few of the clutches—traps grouped in a designated region of the terrain—produced little to tabulate, the catch would be respected and its remains used economically.

Aomine’s nerves spiked with vigor.

The count for the yield was low three deer. Excellent.

He rose, hugging the trunk as he patched an order through the channel, “Teams one through four deliver the goods to the temple kitchen. Teams five through ten retrieve the nets from the reservoir.”

A few miles from the temple were a patchwork of lakes. The main attraction was the larger of the pools, where a system of nets was anchored at the end of every week to be retrieved in five to seven days.

Confirmation on the other end concluded the transmission and Aomine thumbed the device off his ear. He eased from the trunk and pursued a twisting trail of unkempt shrubs and pebbles. Tetsu was nowhere to be seen, but Nigou trotted alongside him. Which meant that the shadow was flitting close by, keeping a weather eye out.

Few things distracted Aomine, his senses wired to the prospect of the hunt.

He’d dismissed all his men to enjoy the rapture of today’s morning victories alone.

It was only three deer.

Suddenly a wicked jostle of leaves behind him.

He whirled, blade thrusting for contact.

A weak resistance with a strong grip stopped him and he let his bearings realign.

Tetsu stared with concern. Nigou paced, his momentary excitement squelched by Aomine’s unexpected motion.

“Will you quit that?” He smacked the shadow’s hand away and slid the knife into a thigh holster.

At that moment he realized Tetsu appeared at eye level, half of his body still molded to the ghostly shade of another pine.

“Something up?”

Tetsu slid himself from the retreat yet kept his hand tangled within the hazy darkness. As if ready to embrace it at a moment’s notice.
“I saw an elk this morning, Aomine-kun.”

An uneasy weight settled deep in his gut. Lucrative but not always worth the trouble. If his scar was any indication.

“We need deer, not elk.” He palmed his neck and turned to continue on.

Tetsu grabbed his shirt.

Odd. He was hardly ever this cagey.

He glanced to Nigou and saw similar apprehension in the malamute’s eyes.

Silently he blessed the two of them and their instincts. Elk and moose were prominent species in the area and it wasn’t uncommon to confuse them on foggy mornings like this.

The dots connected and his brow stiffened with a smile. “Looks like someone’s come to see me.”

“This isn’t funny, Aomine-kun.” Tetsu’s voice adopted a novel sternness.

But he couldn’t abate the eagerness cracking his lips apart. The elk equated to a high class Fire Apparition. He ignored the nagging voice advising that he err on the side of caution. It had been a serendipitous series of events. And all within three hours. But to overlook the chance of taking down a royal elk or the greater accomplishment of capturing a Fire dignitary? No way. Rarely was Aomine presented with such opportunity.

He shrugged off the bow strapped across his torso and thumbed for an arrow. “Tell me where you saw it.”

—

Kagami crept through the stillness, ears tuned to the ambiance. The exertion to remain attentive was taxing as his muscles argued vehemently. He willed them to cooperate. Bargained, even. Apparitions his age were well versed to their limitations and would never purposely put themselves at a disadvantage. The breathy fog taunted his body with languid lust and the urge to crumple into a drowsy pile.

But he resisted and pressed on, vaulting soundlessly over a toppled beech.

Crack.

He froze, eyes darting across the expanse before him.

Movement. One hundred feet away.

Kagami sidled to a row of berried bushes and waited.

A gray blur neared. Not yet distinguishable between man or beast.

He reached for a throwing knife on his calf.

It edged closer. Seventy feet.
He scooted to the edge and cocked his arm.

Kagami leaned from cover and flicked the weapon.

The elk screeched and skipped the knife by mere inches.

He sighed, tense breaths suddenly accompanying his racing heart. Damn animal.

“I didn’t summon you,” he whispered through a spit of agitation as he carefully recovered the knife, gaze roving the area.

The knife was returned to the holster and he beckoned the animal to him. He grabbed its muzzle upon approach. A nervous light gleamed in the elk’s eyes that Kagami had seen a few times before. Ears turned feverishly. Hooves tapped the earth with tentative touches. Somehow the creature eased its way behind Kagami and that’s when the realization dawned on him.

A cursory inspection of the animal’s body showed no injury as of yet. No sign of struggle or escape, either. The leather saddle pad remained intact.

A predator was nearby.

The elk came to alert him. He smiled and stroked its face.

Then an idea came to him.

It may have been nothing to concern himself with. But maybe it was.

With a pop to its haunch, the elk trotted off into the mist.

Kagami tailed the creature using the ample coverage of forest overgrowth. Its ears were all the indication he needed. Four hundred feet were cleared and then it stopped.

He halted. Did it locate the predator?

The elk’s posture adopted the lethargy that Kagami’s muscles so desperately coveted and began sauntering aimlessly, mouth searching the forest floor for edible tidbits.

Kagami pressed against the nearest tree and, with quickened ease, scaled its length.

—

Aomine slowed his advance following Nigou’s signal. The dog crept with molten slowness. Ears erect, eyes alert, hackles stiff. A silent trek through six hundred feet of patchy dense trail led them into view of an oblong clearing no greater than fifty feet in diameter. Then the dog paused, head rearing up.

Aomine tightened his grip on the bow, index finger curled over a loaded arrow.

Leaves trickled down and he quickly peeked overhead. Tetsu skipped to a neighboring branch that did little to dip under the shadow’s weight. Leaning into the sturdy bulk of a towering fir, he watched as Tetsu seamlessly threaded the twiggy netting. Nigou snorted and took off in the opposite direction.
He disregarded their retreat and observed movement through the fog.

A faint blur. But large. Possibly his quarry.

Aomine pushed off the bark and slithered with long strides to the cover offered by a hulking boulder. Nothing indicated that he’d been detected.

Feathery fingers stretched from the blur’s head.

He moved obliquely to a hearty shrub and identified a darker patch across the back.

A leather pad and girth wrap.

*Excellent.*

Aomine gauged the creature’s awareness before zigzagging to decrease distance. He found a U-bend of shrubs and nestled close. The elk’s muzzle massaged the lawn of yellow-green.

He eased the bow soundlessly into position.

---

Kagami followed the elk. Though strenuous with his large body, he negotiated the overlapping web of branches filtering little to no sunlight to the forest floor. The elk scoured through a thick vein that deposited into an oblong clearing. Where it now loitered.

The predator was close.

Or, what Kagami had been considering, his target.

He wound his arm around the trunk and searched the area for movement or discrepancies. Off to the right, secluded in a patch.

Squinting revealed the desired details.

Short dark hair, brown skin, and the appropriate build.

A feral heat flooded Kagami’s nerves.

He judged the remaining distance and factored about forty feet lie between him and the man.

With controlled movements, he closed in.

His thighs screamed in rebellion.

The glint of the arrowhead caught Kagami’s gaze. His quarry drew the bow and the man’s exposed profile confirmed it.

This was Aomine Daiki.

He unsheathed the *kodachi*, sucked a steeling breath, and threw himself downwards.

Right over Aomine.
Aomine steadied his aim with a steady exhale and cocked the bow.

A snap overhead echoed the loosing of the arrow.

His body folded over the spent weapon as a mighty weight crashed his body to the soil. Sharp pain shot through his sprained shoulder.

Adrenaline surged his heart and he jerked his head back, connecting with something hard.

The weight lifted marginally and he scrambled through the scrunched head of leaves. He whipped around, knife in-hand.

A blur embossed his vision from his date with gravity. Whatever it was, it was massive and charging for him.

He evaded an incoming jab for his torso, catching the glint of a blade—longer than his but short enough to be considered close-quartered. A wisp of heat fanned his shirt.

Son of a bitch.

Without assuring his luck, he reached and clutched a rough collar. He violently tugged and connected their foreheads.

The enemy staggered. As did he, but many bouts with Nebuya acclimated him to the impact.

Aomine thrust the knife. The man launched a punch, which opened to clutch his fist.

A flicker in the enemy’s empty hand startled him.

He knew what was coming but didn’t react fast enough.

White hot pain seared throughout his waist.

The enemy pulled him into a flexed knee.

Breath exploded from him.

A blow to the back of the neck surrendered him to the damp grassy bedding.

He heaved to grab air.

God damn it, where was Tetsu?

Large fingers gripped his hair and yanked him into a painful arch on his knees.

Sunlight parted the overcast and refracted off a ready blade.

Cocked to plunge into his heart.

The enemy muttered something equivocal and drove the tip downward.
Or he would have, had a black vine not secured the weapon.

“Aomine-kun.” A shout.

He sucked air and drove his elbow into the man’s groin. He crunched on the enemy’s instep and his head met a hard jaw.

The enemy staggered again and released the blade.

Aomine grabbed his neck and, with the strained effort of his afflicted shoulder and now pulsing abdomen, heaved the man over his back where he met the soil with a bone-crushing thud.

His nerves fired wildly. His pulse deafened his senses as he stood at the ready, waiting for the man to move.

Tetsu slid between them, a tendril sprouting from his shadow to grip the fallen blade. A second slithered to the crumpled form, forking to bind the attacker’s hands. Aomine didn’t wait for the shadow to arrest him. A harsh tug rolled the man on his side, revealing a face Aomine had seen a handful of times throughout his century of life. Shaggy red hair, a triangular jaw, and distinctive split eyebrows.

“Is that how it is,” he hissed.

His blessed mood transformed into guarded rage instantly.

Pain swirled through him, reigniting his hushed headache. The burn seared with every movement. And to top it off, his kill escaped. The lesser of his concerns now, all things considered.

Tetsu approached with the enemy’s knife passively in his grasp. “Lord Akashi Seijuurou’s brother.”

Aomine growled, popping his toe on the man’s arm.

“Kagami Taiga.”
“See something you like?” he taunted, allowing smugness to crook his mouth.

The shadow remained still.

Kagami sighed impatiently and squirmed to sit comfortably, finding the black fetters unrelenting. “Do you mind?”

“Not particularly.”

“Well my ass is numb, so let up some.” He doubted his complaints would merit clemency, but it wouldn’t hurt to try.

Chapter Notes

This story will be long, almost novel-length. This is what happens when I read in the summer DX.

Nigou stood at attention beside his disgruntled partner as Kuroko inspected the last of the man’s gear. The haul back to the temple had been uncomfortable. Nothing had gone according to plan and Kuroko was displeased with his arbitrary choices.

He hadn’t consented with Aomine to leave or to send Nigou after the elk. Where they needed to be was with him. Both would have contained Kagami long enough to allow Aomine the upper hand.

His partner had tangled with the Fire breed before. But none of this caliber.

He recalled their brief post-conflict exchange.

“All the same, I can’t let Aomine worsen his condition by lugging the man back with what may be a third degree burn. All other damages aside. Kuroko had witnessed the attack, caught off guard by how suddenly it transpired. One moment he was monitoring the bow trained on the elk and the next it had bolted off and Aomine was crushed beneath a large body.

What could he have done?

No, excuses were unacceptable. Kuroko put too much faith in Aomine’s schooled composure and assured himself that he could act alone. Somehow convinced himself to allow his partner a moment of relaxation. The milestone achieved today during the board meeting, along with the
success of the hunt, warranted slackened supervision.

It was the first time he had so horrendously miscalculated.

And he swore on his now indefinite life there would not be another.

He raked Kagami’s form folded over Aomine’s shoulder as he stuck to his flank. The man was a smidge smaller than Aomine in height but was built like a brick wall. Ferocity exuded his features even through the mask of paralysis. Short red hair topped his head with darkened tips. The man was clothed in similar gear to both he and Aomine, suitable to covert operations.

Kuroko filed that away for future inquiry.

“Aomine-kun.” He tried again.

“Quiet,” was Aomine’s quick rebuttal.

His heart clenched. Dammit.

“Aomi—”

“Just sneak us into the holding cells undetected and don’t say another word.”

He couldn’t argue.

So he nodded.

“Looks like he came after me fully-cocked.” Aomine glanced to the sprawled weaponry. “More than anyone else had. I should be flattered.”

Kuroko said nothing, remembering his orders to remain silent.

Entering the holding cells of the hunter’s guild had proven vexing. Ingress through the lobby was simple, as nearly all the hunters were on assignment retrieving or delivering goods for the temple kitchen. Others were sure to be mingling with temple residents in the dining hall or dedicating themselves to exercise in the gymnasium. Technicians maintaining the armory made traversing to the basement level difficult. They managed to skulk through lesser lit halls, much to Kuroko’s advantage, and located the holding cells. Aomine expressed gratitude for the lack of POWs.

He looked to Kagami.

The man sat on a wooden chair in his underwear with his chin to his chest. A charcoal undershirt was tousled from an inspection for withheld items. Experience disciplined Aomine to take every precaution with the enemy. The sharp lighting of overhead bulbs made it easy for Kuroko to restrain Kagami with the plenitude of shadows tattooing the smooth stone. Black belts encircled the wrists, ankles, and hips.

“Tetsu.”

He flinched, the voice calm as it soothed his timid nerves. He caught Aomine’s embittered grimace. Drying blood caked Aomine’s fringed shirt and, even without facing him, Kuroko could see a rosy rawness to his partner’s dark skin. There hadn’t been enough incentive to encourage Aomine to prioritize and seek treatment. Nor did Kuroko impose.
“Be ready. I’m waking him up.”

---

A violent kick roused Kagami with an undignified snort. He snapped upright, throwing his
distorted gaze around the room. His jaw ached like hell. As did his foot and groin. Try as he might,
he couldn’t soothe the more intense of his discomforts.

He heard a vindictive chuckle and squeezed his eyes shut to clear the film over his eyes.

“Payback for the burn, asshole.” The voice was deep and languid.

For a moment he entertained that such a tone could put him to sleep. “Hardly recompense for all
the damage you’ve done.”

A sudden twinge of copper hit his tongue and he cringed. Fucker split his lip.

“Can’t say I ever offended you, Kagami Taiga, Lord Akashi Seijuurou’s precious baby brother.”

“Half-brother,” Kagami snapped at the flagrant sarcasm.

Aomine shrugged which only embellished his temper. He gauged the restraints with a few tugs.
Not rope or twine. In fact, it felt like nothing but pressure. Which meant he was being anchored by
the bastard’s bodyguard. Yet where was he?

His studied Aomine Daiki. Tall and lean. Swarthy-skinned and a face tightened with appraisal.
Despite his size, he hadn’t felt like much when Kagami took him down. Though being taken off
guard factored into how easily the prick crumpled underneath him. A diligent air surrounded him.
But something was amiss. A certain dullness consumed Aomine’s eyes. Kagami had been told that
Aomine not only headed his own outfit but also held a position as an Ambassador on the War
Administrator’s board. A high honor, to be sure. Not to mention the triumph of surviving nearly
one hundred and twenty attempts on his life; forty-eight of which had come from the Fire
Apparition charter of Shadow agents.

So why the unfulfilled look?

He didn’t muse long as Aomine leaned off the table, revealing a massive dog sitting rigid.
Apprehension overtook him. The stare in those vacant eyes clutched him in a vice. If there were
anything more apodictic in this world, it was that Kagami did not like dogs.

“You’re a goddamn idiot.” Not the opening line he expected.

Kagami quickly schooled his features.

“You trying to unsettle the balance?”

“Right,” he scoffed, defiantly turning his face away. “Because this whole issue is the Fire’s fault.”

“Ask the border towns.” Aomine’s rebuke was swift. “I’m sure the families will have an adequate
answer.”

“It’s not like you didn’t see this coming, asshole. Let up with the bravado already.” Rough pressure
squeezed the restraints and he jerked his head down to his lap. A black belt wound tight around his waistline. He peered over the edge of the chair to the ebony pool where he spotted an arm leading away. It connected to the thick shadows of the table where his equipment lay. It was then that he noticed a form nearly molded to the darkness. A man, from a brief glance.

But he was given no time to examine further. Aomine stepped in the way.

“I didn’t see the brother—”

“Half-brother.”

Aomine popped his face. “How did I not see my fated meeting with the annoying kin of Akashi Seijuurou?”

Kagami sat stiff, obstinate. He searched the deep recesses of the bastard’s eyes. It seemed Aomine wasn’t privy to the truth.

Perfect. A workable advantage.

Not like his current predicament. But Kagami celebrated one victory at a time.

The pressure to his fetters returned and he yelped, looking around Aomine to the man at the table.

“Cut it out,” he barked, in English.

Both men’s faces twisted in confusion, which only delighted Kagami more. English was the Apparition political vernacular, necessary to settle international debates in comfort. A conciliatory movement to satisfy the sovereigns, all of whom refused to educate themselves in each other’s language. Not all were taught. Only those to be found in political conventions. Kagami had simply found the language entertaining and offered to be his brother’s translator. He silently wondered then why Aomine hadn’t understood.

A sudden hand flattened across his mouth dampened his elation. Aomine’s fingers squeezed and his face neared.

“Don’t fuck with me.” Each syllable was venomous. “What do you mean I should have expected this? And answer wisely. I’d rather not disfigure your face.”

The hand slid away but remained ready to act.

He straightened himself, looked Aomine in the eye, and said, “You’re a Neutral.”

Aomine hadn’t expected himself to react so violently.

His knuckles pounded Kagami’s jaw as soon as the words left his mouth. It resonated like one’s palm slapping stone. The man’s head tore to the side and a flash of pain contorted his face. Blood spotted the floor as Kagami groaned and readjusted himself in the chair. If his hand throbbed, then he only hoped he’d transmitted some of that pain through this prick’s skull.

He shook away the growing numbness and repeated, “Don’t fuck with me.”
But Kagami only grinned. The urge to slug him again was tempting but he refrained.

“Wow, this is actually less enjoyable than I thought it’d be.” The man tipped his head to one side and spit a dollop of blood.

Aomine’s patience was wearing. Pain festered in nearly every inch of him. Anger only exacerbated it.

Him, a Neutral? He wouldn’t believe it.

So he reigned in his composure and tried, “And why is that funny?”

“Not so much funny as disappointing.”

His mouth tightened. Kagami appraised him with a look he did not appreciate.

Then he snorted. “Are you really that naïve?”

Rationality told him not to rise to the bait and he remained silent. Either way, he wanted—no, needed—to hear what Kagami had to say. And the less exertion on his part, the better. Coping with the upcoming character assassination, though, would prove challenging.

“You live in the Ice Nation with your doting uncle,” the man started, assuming an air of superiority that rankled Aomine. “The Dan of the Ice. An Ice Apparition. And for one hundred years of your miserable life you can’t even pick a snowflake out of the sky.”

The words left him too quickly. “It’s a birth defect.”

Kagami’s brows rose with feigned interest. “So which of your parents was genetically inept?”

Aomine struck him again, evening out the other cheek for good measure.

“Well,” the man strained through a painful cringe. “Seems I’ve got your full attention now.”

Without restraint he fisted the prick’s hair and cruelly arched his neck across the back of the chair. The blinding glare sealed Kagami’s annoying scarlet gaze.

“I will break your goddamn neck.”

“Touchy subject, then. Parents.”

He shoved the Kagami’s head forward and inhaled a long, deep breath. The pain intensified and Aomine realized that what had once been a fortuitous day was now squandered. If he managed a wink of sleep at all tonight, he would be genuinely surprised. Allowing Kagami a moment to shuck the petty teen rebellion, he situated himself at what he considered a reasonable distance and slumped back against the table.

After a spell of groaning through the pain he was sure rattled the man’s brain, Kagami spoke again. “It never bothered you that Imayoshi lied away your case of sterilization by admission of a ‘birth defect’? Did you even bother looking into it? You’re a goddamn Neutral.” The man shifted, seeking comfort. “The only thing in this realm we hunt more than game, are Neutrals. One hundred and twenty times you’ve been targeted and it never struck you as odd?”

Aomine said nothing.

“Just because you look like an Ice Apparition doesn’t affiliate you among their ranks. What about
the fact that you’re the master hunter and Imayoshi’s Ambassador? You know how many pureblooded Apparitions vie their asses off to land that seat? It was handed to you. Because your pathetic uncle pitied your lonely existence and gave you something to make you appear more important than you really are.”

He lurched forward but his blow slid through the flames now engulfing Kagami’s head and neck.

A new level of frustration blistered within Aomine. One that sent a static charge of pain through him.

That smug condescending look through the receding yellow-orange flicker did nothing to calm him. The faint throbbing incurred from the impulsive punch went ignored.

As the last of the fire extinguished a black thread shot up Kagami’s chest and coiled around his mouth. He squirmed in protest as Tetsu tightened the restraints.

The shadow stepped forward and laid a tight hand on Aomine’s shoulder, prying with gentle force. He looked down to concerned eyes.

He hated that look.

“Aomine-kun, please take a breather. Run water over the wound, at least,” Tetsu said.

He hesitated, his gaze flitting to Kagami’s sour stare.

“Please.” A swirl of self-loathing tamed his frayed nerves, over-stimulated from pain and anger.

“I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

Then he pivoted and left.

—

Kagami itched restlessly. The ache in his face hadn’t subsided but he had to hand it to Aomine. For his ineptitude as an Apparition, the man possessed the physical strength to protect himself. Though not nearly enough, as Kuroko provided residual insurance.

It had been a good five minutes since the Neutral stalked off, body teetering between injury and consternation. He’d noticed it during his and Aomine’s exchange. Those onyx eyes were riveted to him, ignoring everything else. But there was more.

Something that the shadow’s intervention verified.

Aomine Daiki didn’t know how to be angry.

Irate was one thing, which he’d intercepted from the first blow that graced his cheek. But the chaotic swarm of emotions that flooded the man’s face as Kagami needled, prodded deep into guarded wounds, was something else entirely. And it struck him as odd.

First impressions told Kagami that Aomine was a calculated man. One who carried himself passively, disinterestedly. And their interaction within the holding cells displayed the anticipated primitive emotions that any Apparition would present. Apprehension, restraint, defiance. But as
Kagami decided to knock the man off kilter, Aomine’s face betrayed his body.

A flash of shock and twinge of hurt streaked his features at every reaction to Kagami’s relentless offenses.

He captured the shadow’s lingering gaze, the icy blue stare burning. Described accurately in the contract, the shorter man sported pale hair, skin, and eyes, and for just a brief moment Kagami chastised himself for not noticing him first.

“See something you like?” he taunted, allowing smugness to crook his mouth.

The shadow remained still.

Kagami sighed impatiently and squirmed to sit comfortably, finding the black fetters unrelenting.

“How do you mind?”

“Not particularly.”

“Well my ass is numb, so let up some.” He doubted his complaints would merit clemency, but it wouldn’t hurt to try.

“Why did you do that?” The man’s brow pinched ever so slightly in disappointment and Kagami almost accepted the scolding with silence.

“He’s a Neutral. I’m just breaking the news to him before I kill him.” He looked down his nose to the shadow’s sullen face. “You should thank me for it.”

A faint touch brushed his ear and he jerked his head away. A black tendril whipped expectantly, poised to assault again. He shot a glare to the man.

“It’s a birth defect.” The hint of banality in his tone genuinely surprised Kagami and, despite the awaiting tendril, he sat straight.

For all his posturing, the shadow didn’t seem to believe the ridiculous lie either. Kagami carefully weighed his options of harassing the man before speaking up, “Is it really?”

The man’s jaw tightened and he broke eye contact as he slid to sit on the edge of the table. The dog stood and Kagami tensed until it seated itself at the man’s feet. He watched as unreadable eyes seemed to search for a profound answer, brows knitting tight.

The silence was agonizing and Kagami couldn’t waste time loitering until Aomine came back to disassemble his face.

So he decided to ask, “How are you even in his employ?” The shadow tilted his head, trapping his gaze but he didn’t allow time to respond. “The Ice don’t partner with the Shadow. Never have unless under a state of extreme duress. But that was before they screwed themselves out of the partnership.”

Icy pools scoured the equipment laid meticulously on the table top. Agitation bowed Kagami’s mouth. He couldn’t be certain, but he entertained that the shadow was playing coy just to piss him off.

Then he caught the lingering stare on the kodachi and smirked.

“You tried to kill him.”
Unexpectedly the shorter man whipped his head to face Kagami, eyes touched with guarded surprise. Which evolved into irritation just as quickly.

“So that’s how it is.” He couldn’t help but chuckle, craning his head back satisfied. “You failed and got stuck being his babysitter.”

Another airy touch tickled his neck and he squirmed. His belly and back were similarly assaulted. A dozen tube-like protrusions fanned his skin from the fetters, abusing him with aggravatingly breathy touches. The sensation was unwelcome and he writhed, cursing the multiple aggressors.

“What I did in the past is irrelevant. The real question is,” the shadow slid off the table, the tendrils’ attack continuing undaunted. The man reached for Kagami’s folded pants and fussed through one pocket at a time. A content smile graced thin lips when the contract was brought into view. “Why does the crown prince of the Fire Apparitions possess contracts to terminate Neutrals? Especially level-one threats.”

Kagami tousled with the black vines and clamped his teeth down on one wiggling beside his nose. Charcoal laced his tongue and he spat dejectedly. First and last time he would ever attempt that mistake. “What I do is my business,” he said, resisting the urge to snap at a second tendril flicking at his neck.

“You never answered my question.”

Kagami’s temper flared and a mane of fire exploded from his skin, sizzling the offending vines to ash. To his dismay, the fetters remained intact. “Keep harassing me with these creepy shadows and I’ll say even less.”

Not that he was promising to disclose anything at all. But the man lessened up and finally Kagami adjusted, feeling an unsatisfying tingle invade his sore ass.

“Why did you insult Aomine-kun?” The shadow asked again, discarding the pants to the table in a heap. The paper remained tucked in a clenched hand.

Resignation threatened to claim Kagami’s face but he inhaled deep and gestured to the sheet with a jerk of his head.

Wordlessly the man thumbed the manhandled sheet open. Eyes skimmed past the information and threaded along what Kagami knew were the list of signed names. The shadow turned the paper over, gaze streaming additional participants.

Then his face wrinkled with what appeared to be disgust but closer inspection suggested something else Kagami couldn’t put his finger on.

“Five of these names are circled.”

“That’s right.” Pride swelled deep within Kagami’s chest, churning with the malice that those names evoked. “A-grade assassins from the Fire charter. All killed by Aomine.”

The man peeked briefly over the top of the sheet and read aloud. “Hanamiya Makoto. Haizaki Shougo. Moriyama Yoshitaka. Mitobe Rinnosuke.” Hesitation. “Kuroko Tetsuya. You expect to avenge all five of these men? You’re a prince.” The page was creased and tucked into the man’s folded arms. “Stick to politics and leave this alone. For your own benefit.”

What Kagami heard was an insult and he bristled. Bulbs of fire dotted his exposed skin.
“He’s a serial killer. A nobody who somehow managed to kill five highly trained Shadow Apparitions with no Apparition power whatsoever. You’ve been under his boot for too long if you think the state of the world now is my fault.”

“Killing Aomine-kun will tip the balance.” An unprecedented volume assumed the man’s voice. “And he taking your life will achieve no better a result.”

Despite himself, Kagami sat stunned and the flares extinguished.

“So, I’m asking you one final time.” The man slid his eyes closed and shouldered an unsteady breath. Sincere blue bored into him. “Please, placate Aomine-kun and never return here again.”
With whatever liberty the man had, Kagami was leaning in vain to distance himself from Nigou who sat flush against the chair, massive head hovering close to the prince’s face. He’d flinched as one of Tetsu’s shadows brushed his face, ribs, or other areas of exposed skin to nudge him within range of the dog’s mouth. Entering silently allowed him this spectacle and he filed the experience away for future reference.

I've been cranking so hard on making the flow of this story synergistic that I'll probably make myself sick, lol. As always, I really appreciate the attention. I was hesitant to post this story at all, given that I never write fanfiction, but I really dig these basketball idiots and, unfortunately, I'm only capable of writing crap. My apologies m( ; ;)m

The library was the last place Aomine imagined himself being. Decades of tutoring and scholarship had spoiled his appreciation for archiving the vast information withheld in the second temple’s grand repository. The tiny collection he maintained in his own chamber was essential to his station as Ambassador. Most tomes were of language, geography, war history, and economics, interspersed among his treasured erotica. Imayoshi decided that seizing the offensive material had become too tedious and allowed Aomine license to come into as much of it as he wanted so long as he complied with his obligations.

He had thought to inspect the restricted section of the library’s west wing for new works. Though he weathered a few thousand in the temple’s massive reserve, he always welcomed novel reading material. But pleasure reading wasn’t what he’d wanted now and a distraction was second to that.

He was on a mission.

You’re a god damn Neutral. Kagami’s impudent declaration rung through his mind with a clangorous knell.

It was rare for him to invite rumor and speculation. But something about this was foul and very much real. And he needed to be certain before he plunged into another session with the stubborn crown prince.

Before the flicker of dainty candlelight Aomine sat at a long mahogany table. Various-sized books of questionable age sat in a disgraceful pile. Nothing of interest was found in the twenty-six books he pulled from the shelves. Upon entering the quiet repository, Aomine inquired the help of the archivist to locate books relevant to Apparition genetics.

He wasn’t here to pore through countless accounts of Neutrals.
He needed to verify the possibility of a birth defect robbing an Apparition of power.

After the first three books he’d lost track of time. Periodically the archivist would ease to his side and check on his progress.

The last of the bunch was splayed open before his hunched frame, dully throbbing head held aloft by his palm. He couldn’t see Imayoshi about a remedy just yet. Too many questions would be asked concerning his still tattered clothes and the melon-sized burn scoring his skin.

Page after page detailed elementary information about heredity, cumulative accounts shared by half the books he’d already sifted through. Though he couldn’t have been bothered to appreciate the science behind life, he was grateful that there were Apparitions dedicated enough to pen down the intrinsic inner workings of their kind. He paused on a diagram tattooing nearly an entire sheet. A footnote below read “Standard Mating.”

He unintentionally sat at attention as his eyes traced the hand-drawn lines. Colored circles were connected using “T” lines, indicating paternity and the passage of genes. Endowment of Apparition power. Of identity.

Kagami’s words resurfaced and Aomine shoved them down again.

The standard mating of Superior Apparitions: the Fire, Lightning, and Shadow, resulted in an almost fifty-fifty chance that the offspring would follow their mother or father. Exclusion was made for a Shadow-Lightning hybrid, wherein the genetically dominant was the latter and the child would be as such. Hybrids, the text noted, could breed with either of its parents’ Apparition types and produce a pureblooded offspring, restarting the cycle of genetic purity. The Inferior Apparitions: Ice, Wind, and Earth, fared differently. But Aomine only attended to the critical information offered. The Ice was superior or equally dominant to its Inferior comrades. Not something he’d have to think hard about but it made sense.

More pages went ignored as he flipped further, stopping at another diagram, a complicated web of relationships. A mix-and-match nightmare of purebloods of all six races. Just looking at it made his eyes cross. His fingers shooed the image away and his eyes fell to an attractive pair of words at the top of the following page.

“Special Mating.”

The passage below captured his full attention.

*Heredity of the Apparition world has been a paradox of discrepancies for centuries. Physiology an even greater mystery, its operation accepted but not fully explored. The most thoughtfully compromising of which is the concept of Neutrality among the Apparition species. Documentation and interview with several subjects revealed to the scientific community that Neutrals possess no affinities to any of the six races. Phenotypes represent that of a handful of Shadow Apparitions, observation and records explicate. Speculation suggests that Neutrals ingest a mass of incompatible genetics that are discarded in the embryonic stages of development. Earliest documentation of Neutrals shows that despite their ineptitude, they live full lives, as long as two hundred and eighty years to three hundred and fifteen years, in a rare case. The genetic anomaly has only recently been investigated. Scientific grants were issued to verify the mystery of Neutral creation and after an extensive experiment, the following has been discovered.*
Another relationship web was drawn below. The grandparents’ bubbles were tinged red and yellow respectively—Fire and Lightning. A half-and-half colored offspring was mated to an Ice Apparition spouse, colored in a dash of blue. The outcome quirked Aomine’s brow skeptically as he retraced the lineage, hoping to make sense of the information. Three children were born from the hybrid and pureblood parents. One took after the grandfather as Fire, the second after the pureblood parent as Ice. But the third was shaded solid black.

His brows pinched and he quickly fanned back a few pages. None had been missing and the flow of information was uninterrupted.

“How does this make sense?” he questioned, returning to the diagram.

He stared, transfixed on the black circle, the third child.

Needy for answers, he continued reading.

Displayed above is the lineage of a documented family. The grandfather, pictured as red, and the grandmother, pictured as yellow, were purebloods, who produced a hybrid son of Fire and Lightning. Reports detailed that despite his half-blood nature, the son’s genetic prowess was affiliated with that of the Fire. Genealogists confirmed that the Lightning genetics remained dormant, to be passed on to future offspring. Mating with an Ice woman complicated the genetic process of heredity. As aforementioned, Fire and Lightning are dominant genes, which the son possesses. Ice is recessive in comparison. Genealogists theorize that during fertilization and embryonic growth, dominant genes contend for succession. This, scientists agree, is what is responsible for the creation of Neutrals.

Aomine intended to proceed, thoroughly captivated. But the next sheet went on about phenotypes—physical appearances. He thumbed back and forth through the section of a dozen or so pages to find that someone had removed the next bit he’d wanted to see. Anger bubbled in him and he slammed the cover shut. Massaging his temples calmed him, albeit slightly. Maybe he put too much faith in his luck at the board meeting today. Maybe he celebrated too early.

Whatever the case, he was left with more questions than answers and a resistant acceptance that Kagami may actually be telling the truth.

But he wouldn’t. Not yet.

He found a large ornate clock towering above the reception desk that read 4:50 PM. Later than he intended to be away. Yet he didn’t feel sorry. Kagami could stand to suffer Tetsu’s nettling for a while.

Dissatisfied, he shoved his chair out and summoned the archivist. The woman appeared at his side, barely reaching his chest and started collecting the books. He muttered his appreciation and walked out the door.

A deplorable feeling squeezed his stomach as he crossed the planks of the pentagonal platform. He shielded his wound from passersby when appropriate. The sun shone bleakly through the patchy overcast, the chance of rain seemingly scared away. Even if he hadn’t wanted to invite the possibility, if he was a Neutral, it would explain a lot of things.
Chiefly, his ineptitude.

Maybe even his lethargy and growing disinterest in almost everything the temple offered him.

One third of the way through his life and he felt like he hadn’t lived with purpose. But it wasn’t like he hadn’t envisioned living a normal life and he hadn’t shied away from trying. If he really was what Kagami claimed, then surely it was responsible for his empty existence. Not him. Not when he’d tried hard to live just as normally as any other Apparition within the temple.

He’d endorsed relationships, both platonic and romantic with multiple partners. Satsuki was the closest he’d found to attaining the true happiness of family and companionship in a lover. But he couldn’t deliver there, either.

All because of the very real possibility that he was wasted genetics.

Electric pain teased his agitated burn and stimulated his headache.

Kagami Taiga wasn’t going to win that easily. That smug prick.

A new feeling invigorated him and he smirked. His back straightened and he squared his shoulders as he strutted across the pavilion toward the hunter’s guild.

—

Aomine wasn’t exactly surprised by the sight that unfolded before him as he reentered the holding cells.

With whatever liberty the man had, Kagami was leaning in vain to distance himself from Nigou who sat flush against the chair, massive head hovering close to the prince’s face. He’d flinched as one of Tetsu’s shadows brushed his face, ribs, or other areas of exposed skin to nudge him within range of the dog’s mouth. Entering silently allowed him this spectacle and he filed the experience away for future reference.

Having seen enough, he kicked the bulky wooden door shut behind him.

Three sets of eyes landed on him and he curtly strode under the lights without muttering a word. They followed as he approached and pulled the dog away by the harness. A snap of his fingers and jab of his thumb sent the malamute to the door. Silence strained as it skillfully tugged the iron-loop handle and wormed through the crack.

“Aomine-kun.”

He said nothing as he observed the collection of gear on the table.

Tetsu tried again but he signaled for quiet.

“Didn’t expect you to pout,” Kagami snorted, the chair groaning as he resituated himself. “At least be flattered you got those five Shadow assassins on your wall so I can have some satisfaction when I kill you.”

Aomine clutched the kodachi and turned, admiring the marks on the blade. He motioned with it and locked eyes with Kagami’s defiant red stare. “Since you’re so eager to carve another point on
this portable scoreboard of yours,” he lobbed the weapon onto Kagami’s lap.

Both Kagami and Tetsu stared incredulously as he yanked at the collar of his shirt. Two buttons clattered to the stone and he wrenched the garment over his head.

“You’re gonna have to fight me for it,” he said, letting the shirt drop.

“Are you fucking crazy?”

“Aomine-kun, don’t.” The voices mingled together but Aomine ignored them altogether as he divested himself to reveal his bare torso.

The expanse was riddled with scarring, most insignificant, but plenty to prove his tacit point. Which Kagami seemed to ingest immediately.

Tetsu stepped between him and the man, hand pushed firm on his ribs. “Don’t do this, Aomine-kun, you’re already hurt.”

“Leave, Tetsu. He’s nothing I can’t handle.”

Concern flooded the shadow’s face and Aomine locked eyes with him for only a moment.

Wood spanked the floor and an incoming heat alerted him.

In a swift movement, he swung Tetsu behind him and captured Kagami’s incoming fist, the blade clenched within radiating yellow-blue flames. Red intensity seared him and he grinned. Just the reaction he’d been hoping for.

He eased himself and Tetsu from the table, keeping a tight hold on Kagami’s armed hand.

“Leave,” he ordered again, nudging the shadow toward the door.

A flicker of the prince’s gaze allowed Aomine to slip his thumb into Kagami’s grasp and bow the man’s digit into submission. To allot distance to discharge Tetsu and gain control of the situation, he thrust his palm into Kagami’s chest as he dislodged the weapon. Assuredly the man stumbled and Aomine gave a final push to his partner.

He didn’t ask again and Tetsu slid out of sight through the door.

Kagami glared vehemently, rubbing his assaulted chest. Aomine halted his advance with a condescending click of his tongue.

“There are rules to this, Your Highness.” He was gratified to see the insult daunt the man and continued. “You want to kill me, I want to kill you. Thing is, that can’t happen. At least not yet.”

His posture remained poised, at the ready to defend or strike, as they circled the room. Kagami’s eyes never left his, a predatory glint following his every move. “Something you should have thought of before you gallivanted the borderline and tried to murder me.”

Kagami snarled, “Get to the goddamn point.”

He held the weapon aloft. “The blade decides it.” The crinkle of the man’s brow told him he wasn’t entirely convinced but still listening. “You come at me with whatever you got. If I disarm you, I win and you disappear to try again another day. If you subdue me, you win and my life’s yours to take once this inevitable war starts.”

“You really think yourself that skilled?”
“I don’t think,” Aomine baited, tossing the blade. “I know.”
Neutral or not, he had more than enough skill to compensate. He didn’t need a handicap.

A taut smirk tugged Aomine’s mouth, igniting with it fury and tufts of yellow-orange flame upon Kagami’s shoulders and fists. He stood and swapped the blade to his dominant hand.

“You’re starting to bore me, at least put up a fight,” the man taunted.

Uncharacteristically, he snubbed the insult. “Fuck you.”

Seconds that ticked by clutched Kuroko’s heart in an icy grip. He stood stiff just outside the passage to the holding cells. Evening was dawning and the fluorescents consumed the hallway. The hunters would be returning soon to shed their gear and linger about. Something he could not invite.

Aomine had made it clear that he did not want Kuroko to intervene with his and Kagami’s exchange. But it was more than that. Rarely did his partner ever expose himself so vulnerably. Had the circumstances been different, Kuroko would think him intoxicated.

But Aomine had a point to prove, one to assuage his wounded honor. Kuroko could empathize.

Yet to engage Kagami now while at a disadvantage? The damn fool.

He strained his ears to pick up a single sound from beyond the damply lit passageway. Beyond the thick wooden door. The whispering hum of the fluorescents was all that surrounded him and as he stood, duty bound, he wondered.

Should he turn back now and disobey Aomine? Burst through the door and withhold Kagami’s furious advance to allow his partner a chance to strike the prince down?

The thought was tempting. Censure from the Ice people, trifling. The wrath of Lord Akashi Seijuurou, inconsequential.

Despite the reputation Aomine accrued beyond temple walls and across the vast forest wilderness connecting the world of Fire and Ice, he was a fragile, gentle soul. Hardly ever raised his tone or hand in violence, indulged the company of those considered family, and never coveted that which
he knew he could not obtain. Aomine, like any man, like any Apparition, was just another blade of grass on this vast earth, coerced with the rhythm of time and nature.

Contrary to Kagami’s preconceptions, Aomine did not deserve to die. Especially for a lie. At one time in his life, shortly before he’d been sworn into servicing the man, following a difficult interrogation and the subsequent bondage, Kuroko believed it, too. Believed the stigma against Neutrals and all the emptiness they promised. But even now, even if Aomine truly was among the Neutrals, Kuroko could not be seduced into taking his life. The clemency, the patience, and the loyalty Aomine had shown him the last thirty-four years told Kuroko that there were few nefarious things the man could commit to earn Kuroko’s disdain. His hatred. His desire to kill.

He tipped his gaze over his shoulder into the dark abyss where a weak ray of light shone through a rectangular glass slit at the top of the door.

And hoped his partner had made the right call.

—

Kagami’s legs screamed as he fell to his knee yet again. For the fifth consecutive time, Aomine’d slid around his blade with the grace of a feline and threw him off balance with a curt palm thrust. And it pissed him off. No two movements had been the same since they’d begun.

The man bounced on his heels, swiping a leaking trail of sweat from his brow. Tanned skin gleamed from exertion and a fresh blood smeared the burn wound he’d inflicted on Aomine in the forest hours just a few hours ago. Kagami considered it, and many times he came close, but he withdrew.

Neutral or not, he had more than enough skill to compensate. He didn’t need a handicap.

A taut smirk tugged Aomine’s mouth, igniting with it fury and tufts of yellow-orange flame upon Kagami’s shoulders and fists. He stood and swapped the blade to his dominant hand.

“You’re starting to bore me, at least put up a fight,” the man taunted.

Uncharacteristically, he snubbed the insult. “Fuck you.”

In an instant the smirk eroded and Aomine closed the distance with a movement so fast that Kagami regretted blinking. Pressure surged through his abdomen in a crushing wave as the air rattled up his throat. Gripping tight on the hilt, he speared the *kodachi* for Aomine’s abdomen. Similar speed clutched his arm in a savage grip and with another hand flat on Kagami’s ribs, Aomine hurled him. The floor zoomed skyward and blinding light reeled into his vision as his back met stone. Aomine stomped his boot into his armpit and Kagami’s arm was wrenched into an immobilizing arch. He felt the blade slicking from his clammy grip.

No, he thought. He wasn’t done yet.

He clutched the weapon and curled his unarmed hand around the man’s calf. A mighty pull heaved his legs skyward and his foot caught the prick’s jaw with a deep smack. Inertia rolled him backward as Aomine stumbled from the impact. With practiced ease, Kagami’s feet found stone and he reared all one hundred and ninety pounds of himself into Aomine and rock. The resounding thud and guttural cry satisfied him.
Large, calloused hands planted on his shoulders. Electricity priming Kagami’s amply-active nerves, he spun to contend with Aomine. But he hadn’t counted on the man’s resilience. Despite his date with the rock wall, Aomine fluidly slid out of reach. A thick arm ghosted his belly and then Aomine’s presence flushed against his back. Both the man’s arms locked around his waist and Kagami was wrenched backwards, bent back over Aomine where his shoulders and neck kissed the floor with a wet slap. The scene blurred in a cacophony of color and streaks of light as he ignored the distortion and recovered.

A dark blur dashed forward and again his wrist was snatched. An open palm cupped his throat and a swift swipe of Aomine’s foot landed Kagami on his ass. The *kodachi* was whisked from his fist and weight nearly equal to his fell firm on his belly. Knees pinned down his rebelling arms.

Laborious breathing filled the room as Kagami waited for it. The sneering declaration of victory. The haughty berating of his skills. The resignation of utter failure. Shame sealed his eyes but a pinprick poke to his neck sparked them open again.

The sight before him stirred an unfamiliar feeling in his gut. Aomine’s face held an unwelcome gratitude that bristled him. It wasn’t cocky or arrogant. The bastard actually looked sated.

Then a laugh, soft and low. “You lose.”

He glared into the midnight pools, seeing a buoyant light among their depths. The sharpened edge of the blade lifted and Aomine rolled to his feet. When offered a hand, Kagami nearly spat in the man’s direction but merely whacked the gesture down. Without reserve, Aomine ignored his terse rejection and pulled Kagami up by the arm. He wrenched it away as the bodyguard, Tetsu, was summoned again.

The little man skated in with urgency and his icy stare penetrated Aomine for answers the taller man didn’t reveal.

“See that he’s returned to the border and that he crosses it,” Aomine ordered, scooping up his shirt.

Tetsu nodded in agreement and reached for his clothes, but Kagami took a bold step forward and held out his hand. “Sword, asshole.”

Unexpectedly, Aomine stopped and threw the most annoying grin his way. “Letting you live was the deal. Come back for your sword some other time when you’re actually ready to beat me.”

And then he left.

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Kagami absentmindedly swirled his utensils through a murky pool of broth, noodles, and a menagerie of earthy vegetables. His appetite left him hours ago, and even if he allowed his voracious hunger to seize him, his jaw hurt too much to invite even something as effortless as soup. A series of other ornate dishes laid spread about the short table between him and his brother that looked just as appetizing as they smelled. But he couldn’t touch them. He’d only had an hour-and-change by the time he found castle soil again and spent it purifying the stench of loss. A knot rose at the base of his head and his back was tight with sustained abuse.

He’d clearly miscalculated. That much he now knew.
He hated that Akashi was always right.

“Have you seen to the medical staff?” The voice was liquid smooth and hardly disturbed the ambiance of an age-old record player his brother adored playing a whiny tune in the corner. Violins, Akashi had repeatedly told him. Really, they were more like air raid sirens who were facing their last moments of life.

Almost as if to feign interest Kagami plucked a batch of noodles from the bowl and touched them to his mouth only to unceremoniously release them to swim in the now lukewarm broth. He resigned his chopsticks to the table and folded his arms, leaning back in his chair. If Akashi was going to harangue him, he was going to get comfortable first.

“Ease your temper, Taiga,” Akashi said, blowing on a spoonful of decorated rice before ingesting it with the most sickeningly polite table manners Kagami’d ever witnessed. “He could have very well killed you.”

“Nice to know even you doubt me.”

“I never said I did. I just realize the lengths to which Aomine will go to ensure victory.” The tone, though calm, was tight and Akashi locked his heterochromatic gaze on him. “Aomine is a prey animal. Adapted through experience to outwit predators. What did you expect was going to happen?”

Kagami didn’t like the knowing edge to his brother’s voice and without a proper pardon, he jerked out of his chair. He nearly made it to the door before Akashi’s voice froze him.

“The summit with the Kaizer and Dan will be in two days. Aomine Daiki will be present, as Imayoshi’s Ambassador.” The hidden context was clear even before his brother finished. “You are not to engage Aomine again until deliberations are over and we return to the castle. Am I clear?”

Without turning, Kagami muttered his assent and fled the room.

The night sky, daubed with patches of broken overcast, held little of Kagami’s appreciation tonight. Stargazing was a hobby on clear nights after he’d spent rigorous hours before the forge repairing tools for the village folk or mending damaged masonry. Looking up at the sky now, as he followed a rock pathway from the castle’s east wall, only brought him back to the moment he looked up at Aomine from his back on the gritty floor of the holding cells. Passive victory had swirled about the man’s face, muscles resigned from the exercise. But the eyes. A jubilant fire resided in those obscure depths. The same feeling that squeezed Kagami’s gut when Aomine’d assumed victory.

And he hated that.

The compatibility that wrestling for domination brought out between them.

The thought provoked the flames wrapping his raised hand into a wild frenzy, the conflagration oozing down his forearm and threatening to consume the entire appendage.

Damn Aomine Daiki.

“Shouldn’t the fire god keep his fire in check?”

Kagami tipped his head down to find a figure bathed in a violent orange glow. The man was smaller than he by six inches with raven hair and calm black eyes that were revered for their
perspicacity and clairvoyance. Known as the spymaster of the Fire Apparition charter, Izuki Shun possessed an amicability that flattered both colleagues and disciples alike. His one vice was his horrible sense of humor. Puns, and a penchant for heedlessly distributing them. Many had been uttered in Kagami’s company and had Izuki not been acclimated to his temper would have had permanent swollen bruise around his eye. Annoying idiosyncrasies aside, he respected the spymaster who’d lived to see the Americas seize independence from overseas leadership and the world wage international war not once but twice. Kagami’d heard that the man stood amongst the crowd as the wall partitioning Berlin was toppled. There was no doubt that Izuki was a credible handler and a trustworthy bodyguard.

He withheld a growl as he tightened his fist, manipulating the flames to a taut flicker in his supine palm. “Not in the mood for you right now.”

He wove around the shorter man and pressed on toward a hamlet dotted with torch lights and blunt chimney stacks. Izuki sauntered in tow, clearly amused with himself. Kagami daresay the spymaster was skipping but he paid no mind.

“The irony of your name never ceases to amaze me.”

“It’s almost like my father named me with you in mind.”

Izuki deflected his sarcasm. “A mindful name for a –”

The flames licking Kagami’s flesh exploded in ire as he cast a glare on the spymaster. “Seriously, Izuki-senpai, shut up.”

He attended to the pathway, increasing his stride with haste.

“You mean, Senpai shut your pie hole.”

He twisted, the fire launching linearly from his fist. Izuki sidestepped the projectile and covered his mouth to withhold a juvenile snicker as he eased up to Kagami. He shrugged off the incoming consolation but the man clapped a firm hand on his quaking shoulders.

“Allright, alright. I’ll stop jerking your chain.” The glint in those eyes wasn’t too reassuring but he dismissed his cynicism as the man ruffled through his jacket. A taupe-colored folder came to light in the dull moonshine and he plucked it from the spymaster. Izuki followed as he strode on, entering the perimeter of the village.

Lingering passersby gave him welcoming bobs of greeting and he mustered the charity to return the motions as he found a gray brick dwelling through the labyrinth of cobbles. Simple wrought-iron bars guarded two circular windows facing the road and a banner adorned with a hammer and chisel ghosted the scant breeze. Two chimneys jutted from the mansard roof, one significantly thinner and shorter than the other.

Kagami pushed open the timber door and they entered a simple room. A fire pit and suspended cauldron lie in the center where a ring of stones guarded the surrounding unpolished wood floors. A dresser, whereupon lie few trinkets and photos sat beside an oak table strewn with papers, writing instruments, books, and a couple of candles. Dried meat and bundled herbs hung above an iron stove. Beyond partially drawn curtains, tucked in an alcove, was a modest bed, barely large enough for two people. An archway yawned to blackness on the back wall. Though he possessed a room within the castle walls, this was Kagami’s home. Modest living apart from the stuffy atmosphere of aristocratic life was what he long coveted and finally earned upon completing his required courses with an appointed tutor.
He set the folder on the table and loosened the laces of his boots. The fire pit ignited in a tender blaze with a flick of his wrist as he began probing the folder’s contents.

“So,” Izuki started and Kagami heard the slipping of the man’s smooth-soled shoes across the floorboards. “You’re pissed.”

“You had no right to tell Akashi about the contract.” The residual indignation of his humiliating loss was ebbed as his eyes scanned the first sheet. A dossier he requested about Aomine prior to his excursion. Impulsive of him to leave before receiving the documents, he knew, and he was kicking himself for it now. A quick sifting through the half dozen pages satisfied him and proved once again how thorough Izuki had always been.

“You’re his baby brother. He’s been lenient with the hunts only because I’m open about the targets before assigning you.” A fatherly concern swelled in the older man’s voice that smothered Kagami in an unappreciative embrace. “Besides, I didn’t tell him who you were hunting this time. He discovered that all on his own.”

This surprised him and he turned a glance over his shoulder, scrutinizing the informed look on the spymaster’s face. “How did you…”

“He told me he took the contract from you. Gave me quite a lecture, given that he’s still miffed about losing Mitobe and Kuroko.” Pain tightened his face as the last word left his mouth.

Kagami only attended to the expression for a moment before it hit him. The contract paper. His hands frantically patted down pockets and pouches only to yield nothing. He searched his memory for any indication of where he may have dropped it on his progression across the border.

Izuki snickered and, for a moment, redirected his focus. “You actually lost it?”

“It’s around here somewhere,” Kagami said, resisting the temptation to turn out his pockets. “Don’t you have someone’s ass to kiss? Go away. I’m tired.”

The spymaster shook his head with mock disappointment and turned for the door. A brief glance to the open dossier reminded him.

“Izuki.” He quickly remembered to add the respected honorific, as was his way.

The man paused in the doorway. “Yes?”

“Can a birth defect rob an Apparition of power while still allowing a full life?”

Serenity evaporated from relaxed features and the black eyes staring back at him conveyed a punishing look that strummed Kagami’s spine with a cold chill. “No.”

—

“Son of a bitch, ease up. You’re not tenderizing meat.”

“Says the man who can’t even rotate his shoulder without wailing like a wounded dog.” Satsuki ground her dainty yet powerful fingers into the tense muscle of Aomine’s shoulders, eliciting another strained hiss.
She sat behind him on the mattress. Following his victory against Kagami, he changed clothes and encountered her in the dining hall. While Tetsu was preoccupied escorting the unruly Fire prince across enemy lines, the two shared a meal together where Aomine tried, in vain, to get through dinner without submitting to one of his many afflictions. As they walked the expanse of the pavilion, he received a backhand to his stomach for an off-handed comment he made as he compared her culinary prowess to the kitchen staff’s. The resounding yelp had been not only embarrassing but admitting and Satsuki was hurt by Aomine’s suppression. After pulling him into the nearest washroom and hiking up his shirt did she see the burn. A slap, this time to the head, and a brief scolding later and he’d found himself divested and shoved to the plush comfort of his bed. Her aggression had always been attractive, the way her cheeks puffed out and blossomed in a flustered pink hue. But not when she proceeded to manhandle him, driving those skinny elbows into his back and compressing caustic antiseptic to an already raw wound.

After twenty minutes of tending the burn that he adamantly evaded answering to, Tetsu returned, fingered a book from the bookcase, and plopped on the lounge chair.

Where he now lay. The book, a romance novel from what Aomine gleaned from the spine, tented over his sleeping face.

Uncharacteristic of the shadow to fall asleep so haphazardly, his lithe body splayed over the plush cushion.

Aomine told himself to bear with her ministrations. He relaxed and brushed his fingers through a thick coat of black and white. Nigou sat between his folded legs. The dog’s massive head craned at the affection and it lapped Aomine’s face. He grappled its thick muzzle and placed a kiss between icy blue eyes. A giddy snort elicited and Nigou buried his nose into the crook of his neck, sliding into his lap as if he could actually fit. Though Kuroko may have trained the dog, Aomine dished out most the rough-housing and affection.

Satsuki pinched his sore neck and he squeaked, glaring over his shoulder. “Stop making such a racket, you’ll wake Tetsu-kun.”

Hardly, he thought as he scanned his partner.

Tetsu slept like the dead, still and devoted.

“And will you ever tell me how you got this burn?”

“Training accident?” Sastuki groaned, so he fished for another excuse. “I was juggling fire.” Another painful pinch. “Nebuya decided to become an arsonist.” She slapped his uninjured shoulder and shuffled to his side.

Nigou fled the undulating surface and padded to Kuroko where the malamute snuggled beneath the shadow’s draped arm.

“Dammit, Dai-chan, can’t you just tell me?” Her unguarded concern derailed him and it was all he could do to maintain eye contact. “Daiki.”

The exhausted exhalation stunned him. A single word capable of picking the locks to every barrier he erected to keep her out. Keep her unaware and placated. To keep him protected from unwarranted worry and pity for his shortcomings and failures. He knew it wasn’t fair to keep secrets. Not after their history together. Through their childhood, through their marriage, through their divorce, they had never kept each other in the dark. But this was something he couldn’t simply explain away. How was he to tell her that he’d nearly been killed by the crown prince of the
Fire Apparitions? That the same man was the one who inflicted the wretched wound shortly before pinning Aomine into submission?

There was no way to tell her. And he didn’t.

He cupped her face and kissed her forehead, ignoring the frustrated glint of moisture as he slid from the bed and grabbed his shirt from the floor. He whistled for Nigou as he popped the door opened and the two entered the hall.

He knew it wasn’t fair.

But neither was Kagami Taiga crushing his world in his igneous grasp.

—

Kuroko roused to darkness, the room lit only by the candles flickering on Aomine’s nightstand and desk. Outside the clouds had stitched together, veiling the mountains with a murky cool gradient. He couldn’t be certain how long he’d slept, as Aomine hadn’t a clock in his chambers. A quick peek over the spine of his book revealed that both his partner and Momoi were gone.

His brain sloshed with the stress of fatigue as he sat up, setting the book on the window sill. He cupped his face as a torrent of liability crashed over him.

If only he hadn’t miscalculated the presence of an elk. If only he’d pushed harder to convince Imayoshi to detain Aomine.

If only he would have taken responsibility and remained at Aomine’s side. Where he belonged, indefinitely.

The Dan would learn of the attack somehow, and the burn. And the man wouldn’t think twice to roast Kuroko again. He dug his fingers into his eye sockets and rubbed hard.

Pleasing the Dan was never his prerogative, but it made dealing with the man easier. No action—no matter how meticulously performed—ever escaped Imayoshi’s scrutiny. It had been many years since Kuroko revisited the memory, now revived by the contract he’d lifted from Kagami, but he’d missed Izuki’s leadership. Horrible sense of humor aside, the spymaster was an excellent instructor and handler. One who would sooner shoulder the blame of an entire operation on himself than censure his disciples. Always believing that it was the master who was responsible for the student’s failures. Something Imayoshi did not believe.

He regarded the door as the knob jostled and he straightened as a pink head poked inside. The silver of a food tray glinted from the incandescent lights of the hallway.

Momoi’s face softened and she slid inside. “Figured you’d be hungry after your nap.”

He squelched his negativity and allowed a smile to tease his mouth. “I was just resting my eyes.”

She chuckled and he scooted to make room for her on the lounge chair. The tray was placed in the vacant spot instead and he passed her a confused stare. He watched as she struggled to settle on an emotion and a pit hollowed in his stomach.
“What happened, Tetsu-kun?” Her voice was faint and lost, and he detected through the broken syllables that she’d been crying.

“I’m sorry, Momoi-san.”

His heart turned cold when she exhaled a shaky, defeated sigh. He didn’t want to be an accomplice to Aomine’s tirade of evading the truth. He was even less enthusiastic to invite his partner’s contempt. Against his morality, he steeled himself and found watery magenta pools searching him desperately for answers. Ones he could not provide.

Momoi lowered to her knees in front of him and grabbed his hand, squeezing beseechingly. “Please, Tetsu-kun. Who gave Aomine-kun get that burn?”

Kuroko’s brain computed at supersonic speed for a probable excuse. Something to thwart her until he could negotiate the situation better. Inevitably, he realized, he would tell her. Even if Aomine thought less of him for it. Withholding his emotions was painful already but to feign veracity, he reasoned, would hurt much less. Especially if it meant sparing Momoi’s feelings.

For now.

He placed his hand over hers and resolution, spurred by the gleam of her still-present wedding band through his fingers, fortified him to apologize once more in an unprecedented manner. “I’m sorry, Satsuki-san.” Rejection clenched her eyes shut. “But it’s classified. I cannot tell you.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

“You chastise me, Aomine-kun,” Tetsu whispered. “But you were the one flirting with
the enemy during an interrogation.”

Aomine balked and spun to face the shadow. “You’ve seen me flirt and that was not
flirting.”

“True. If you were, he would have slapped you.” He gave an indignant scoff of
approval. “You were courting him.”

Without remorse, Aomine hammered the edge of his palm on Tetsu’s head.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was both fun and annoying. A good few days between writing ten pages
and then hammering out only two really wears on you. Let’s hope my weekend
rejuvenates my creative energies. And as always, thank you for supporting my super
serious story. (y so srs)

The trickling of the fountain ebbed Imayoshi’s disjointed thoughts in steady waves. Cool spray
from overhead misting faucets sprinkled his slickened shoulders and back. Each therapeutic breath
frosted the sheen of moisture in an icy sheet that grew thicker with concentration as he idled on the
cold marble floors of the Water Room. Originating in the middle BCE era, the Ice Apparitions
utilized segregated lakes, streams, and grottoes to practice meditation and achieve tranquility. The
incursion beset by the Lightning and Fire removed the Ice from what the people once considered
sanctuaries of ataraxia. The current state of the world discouraged them from seeking new Meccas
to reconnect with the earth. The Water Room was constructed after the turn of the seventeenth
century and, though completely artificial, it served its purpose for those eager enough.

Sparse lighting ignited the cavernous space, embellished with limestone walls hewn from the
mountains and natural spring water siphoned from the nearby lakes, from candle perches.
Electricity could not intervene.

The drip-drop of condensed water from stalactites paced Imayoshi’s breathing.

Sleep had come sparingly to him last night and he decided to greet the morning early. It was rare
for him to rise before the sun, and he had earned a chaste scolding from the nurses, who had been
startled by his presence. Delighting in fruit he handpicked from the orchard, he then headed
straight for the Water Room. Most visits were purely recreational.

But today he sought reflection.

He’d been in relatively good spirits, fielding the outrage of the border discrepancies with ease, and
keeping all his ducks in a row. Allowing Aomine to work with Nebuya to maximize perimeter control eased the tension. Susa had been delivering, as expected.

Then Kuroko happened.

Locating elks on the mountain was no cause for alarm. They were a common sighting, as were deer, among other animals. But the shadow pressed a profound point. Aomine’s familiar, Nigou, never mistook prey for enemy. He’d considered the possibility that Akashi sent one of his many assassins to squash his brewing revolution, using a royal’s elk to deceive them. Yet he was quick to remind himself that the Fire charter’s spymaster would never allow it. Convenience and efficiency was something the eagle-eyed whelp had in abundance but his weak emotions was what cost him more than just Kuroko Tetsuya. Imayoshi knew Izuki would not attempt such an egregious mistake again.

Which led him to two possible suspects.

Akashi’s War Administrator, Mibuchi Reo. Or his kid brother, Kagami Taiga.

Both were highly skilled in the art of fire manipulation and possessed a viable motive to expunge Aomine. Akashi hardly retaliated against his own personal vendettas.

The quandary taxed his focus and he let out a ragged breath that fogged his glasses. He eagerly awaited the return of Susa, hoping the man had news to bring him from the Lord’s castle. It was true that the Shadow and Ice were not allies, forbidden by the Wolf Pack Pact, but the man’s attributes had an attractive allure that worked to both their advantages. When not fulfilling his confidential servitude to him, Susa was serving as the security advisor for the Lord, Kaizer, and Czar. An arrangement all three men were privy to.

Yesterday morning had almost seen the exposure of his accomplice’s cover with the surprise appearance of Aomine’s pet. Kuroko’s presence among the Ice temple was explained as a punitive agreement and was restricted with conditions to prove the point. Yet his laxity frustrated him. Though a mere pawn, Kuroko navigated the board too freely for Imayoshi’s liking.

He would need to cap a lid on that. And soon.

The crunch of grit captured his attention. The frost covering his exposed back and shoulders sharpened to needle-like points.

“Unclench, it’s only me.”

Imayoshi exhaled and the ice disintegrated into a plume of frozen powder. He tipped his head back to meet Susa’s amused smirk.

He folded his fingers in his lap, palms yawning apart, and resumed steady breathing. “Have you learned anything useful?”

The shadow stepped into his peripheral vision and began, “Akashi didn’t confess much to me before I was dismissed. The fledgling was sulking and was in need of a good lecture.”

The tidbit interested him and he provoked that more be disclosed.

“Eavesdropping would have revealed nothing valuable, but from the microphones I installed, he was reaming the little brat about trying his luck with Aomine. He slipped the border sometime yesterday morning and had a confrontation. From what I saw on his way out, he looked like he got a good beating.”
That delighted him. Inept or not, Aomine devoted himself to self-defense and was recognized for his ability to ground most men in the combat squad, including Nebuya. Kagami Taiga wouldn’t have stood much of a chance.

“How did Aomine fare,” he had to ask. The man hadn’t reported to his office following the hunt and he wasn’t seen causing some form of disturbance anywhere in the pavilion.

“I wondered the same thing,” Susa said, arms crossing. “So I went by the hospital ward and took a gander at the outpatient pharmacy log. Antiseptic, ointment, bandages, and naproxen tablets. Signed M. Sat.”

Imayoshi knew the signature. Momoi Satsuki.

“She didn’t happen to list the patient, did she?” He knew the answer but he wanted to hear it.

“No. Left blank.”

He grinned. And chuckled.

This was the good news he was hoping for. Now, more than ever, he was anxious to meet Lord Akashi and Kaizer Hyuuga.

—

“Aomine-kun, this is a terrible idea.”

“And that’s the fiftieth time you’ve complained, Tetsu,” he griped in a forced whisper. “Now shut it.”

The pair of them knelt in a thicket skirting one of the lower villages of the Fire castle, within sight of the nearest brick home. A map Tetsu produced before their trek began displayed that the dense vegetation crested nearly the entire hamlet, making ingress simple once the sun tucked away.

Orange and pink striated the lingering overcast and the collective crowing of birds signaled that night was fast approaching. The air was slick, as it had been yesterday. But Aomine reminded himself not to allow the bizarre calming effect of the mugginess to commandeer him headlong into trouble.

“We’re neck-deep in enemy territory without a visa. And all because you insist on jerking Kagami-kun around.”

He grumbled at the courtesy. “Honorifics, really?”

Nearby movement silenced them and they hunkered down into the shrubs. A band of children stormed around the field, launching wisps of fire at each other before disappearing behind the nearest dwelling. The beckoning of a concerned parent assured him that the interlopers wouldn’t cause further problems and he remained motionless for a few moments. They continued on, keeping low.

“You chastise me, Aomine-kun,” Tetsu whispered. “But you were the one flirting with the enemy during an interrogation.”
Aomine balked and spun to face the shadow. “You’ve seen me flirt and that was not flirting.”

“True. If you were, he would have slapped you.” He gave an indignant scoff of approval. “You were courting him.”

Without remorse, Aomine hammered the edge of his palm on Tetsu’s head.

At times he hated that the shadow knew as much as he did. Aomine never questioned his sexuality but had simply let it flourish. Women were immensely attractive, their skin soft and curves inviting. He had found through past flings that he was not immune to a supple bosom. During adolescence he would find his gaze lingering on other men, appreciating their sculpted physiques and came to the realization shortly before his divorce that men were equally attractive. Homosexuality was not a cardinal sin of the Ice temple, but it was irregular and private. Aomine hadn’t worried as he’d identified as bisexual, finding sexual attraction with either gender with little complaint. Several relationships had spawned following his separation from Satsuki but the residual bitterness and self-deprecating took its toll. The longest one he’d participated in lasted little over a month. He had been successful so far in the last fifty years to withhold his orientation from all except Tetsu and Satsuki, his most trusted confessors. Not even Imayoshi was aware of his sexual inclinations. And wouldn’t be until it became detrimental.

Had he thought Kagami was attractive? Hard to say. His energy was spent silencing the man’s incessant heckling.

“How about we not discuss my courting when you’re so horrendously oblivious to female advances?” Surveying the encroaching darkness and seeing no activity, they pressed on.

“I’ve told you before, Aomine-kun—”

“I know, I know,” he said, crossing a barren strip of foot traffic into a maze of bark and rock.

“Asexual, doesn’t feel the urge. Still, though, that doesn’t mean you can’t have a girlfriend.”

“Few my age understand my disposition.”

Aomine ducked behind a thick oak and yanked Tetsu down by the arm as a burst of chatter erupted from the cobbles just thirty feet away. Torch lights flickered to life and he watched as a group of men loitered between two gray brick homes, darkened from mold. He could see down the avenue and spotted similar structures. Homes of blacksmiths and carpenters. Menial laborers who represented the backbone of any society. Some minutes later the men disbanded, disappearing into nearby portals. The appetizing smell of cooking meat and herbs tickled his nose but he fought off the hunger. Assured that they were remotely alone, he looked at Tetsu, who had likewise been alerted.

“Ninety-seven is not old. Relationships aren’t just about sex and there’s a girl,” he paused, considering the alternative, “or guy, out there who wants their other half as bad as you do.”

He heard a defeated groan behind him as he skulked through the lush barrier and entered the walkway. “Please don’t play on my romanticism.”

The firelight was potent through the suburbs, bouncing radiantly off stone and rock with adequate contrast to the impending darkness. Aomine reached for and clasped Tetsu’s hand, leading the way through the village. Commensal conversation blipped in and out and few Apparitions remained outdoors as the sun kneeled to the moon. A pair of masons, identified from their tool belts, compelled them to seek the shadows and they unearthed in an oblong cast of blackness behind a large domicile one hundred feet away.
Stepping from the obscure confines, Aomine released his partner’s hand and shuddered. “I never did like doing that. Feels like being wrapped in tar.” Uncertain exactly where they surfaced, he peered beyond the face of the building, down the cobbles. No movement and no trespassers. The same was said of their surroundings. Tetsu eased from the wall and came around to the front.

“Aomine-kun, we’re here.”

He followed and perused the structure. Two round windows facing the street, a banner of a hammer and chisel, and a timber door. Smoke leaked from two chimney stacks, one larger than the other. A squatty rectangle of slate bricks that supported an additional wing for steel forgery. A modest little home. Aomine recalled little that he’d learned about Kagami in his century of life, reading and hearing even less. What he did know was that Kagami was the antithesis of his brother, hunted Neutrals, and dabbled in smithing. The map Tetsu had shown him of the area indicated renovations to the town in colored ink, the date inscribed within the legend. This building existed as a simple home, until the 1950s when the forgery was added. When Kagami Taiga was emancipated from his brother’s influence.

He approached the door and tested the latch, finding himself surprised when the door creaked ajar. He entered and was bathed in the docile heat of the flames of the fire pit. The simple, yet domestic, feel of the interior surprised him. Equipped with enough to survive and laden with no luxuries that would be found in a castle chamber. Tetsu shut the door behind them and investigated. Curiosity coerced Aomine to explore as well and he crossed the unpolished wood to the gaping arch on the back wall. Embers breathed faint life into the stone furnace and tools lay dispersed along an unfurnished oak table. Works-in-progress hung from pegs mounted to the infrastructure and he stopped to examine them, noting the similar detail and shine the metal refracted.

“Aomine-kun.”

He retreated, gaze lingering on the metalwork until he passed the portal, and spotted Tetsu standing before a large desk where he was transfixed on an open folder. He peered over the shadow’s shoulder. The sight stunned him.

On Kagami’s desk was a dossier about him. Marks littered the pages, bringing attention to desired information. Some of his accomplishments were accented with a circle and documented moments of his life underlined or bracketed. The sudden intimate interest in him sparked a foreign feeling in his gut and he couldn’t prevent his lips from cracking apart.

He responded by producing the kodachi. One surface was streaked with oblique lines, signifying Kagami’s Neutral pursuits. Then he turned it over. Two faint marks adorned the face.

*His* contest with Kagami.

He felt a familiar tingle and met Tetsu’s uneasy stare. A subtle nudge ushered a trusting smile to the shadow’s lips and Aomine set the sword on the table. He knew the declaration of war would generate unrest for his partner. But Aomine wanted it.

The challenge. The thrill of hanging on the edge. The satisfaction of a well-fought battle.

But more than that, he wanted to maintain that cryptic jubilance he felt as he grappled with Kagami.

And if he was playing his cards right, Kagami would accept the invitation.

Tetsu sighed and they both headed for the door. “If only I was paid for my tolerance.”
Aomine pulled the shorter man to his side and playfully jostled him. “I pay you with love. Pure and unadulterated.”

An incoming voice froze them and trepidation kept them bolted. Would the person pass by? Then a second louder and annoyed voice geared Aomine’s legs in reverse. He grasped Tetsu by the neck and scurried the both of them into the gloomy blackness of the forgery. He held Tetsu tight, defensively, to his chest as he tamed his panic.

The timber door flew open. “I’m not gonna say it again, Izuki. Enough with the goddamn puns.”

So, he’d been right to recognize the second unknown.

Kagami Taiga.

—

Kagami stalked to his bed where he dumped his equipment belt. He dropped to the mattress and ripped at his bootlaces. Izuki slid inside and waited with a pensive expression. Which irritated him more. It was one misfortune to suffer the man’s shitty sense of humor, but to shoulder being escorted almost everywhere on the premises—on his brother’s orders—left him spiteful and vindictive.

To hell with Akashi and his doting complexes.

“You know, when you were a boy, you used to love my puns.”

“There’s this thing called moderation, senpai,” he ground out and pulled off his boots. “Which you so grossly misinterpret as casual conversation.”

“You’re so much cuter when you’re not angry.”

The jab daunted him and he sputtered at the spymaster’s elated face. “Don’t call me cute.”

He reigned in his embarrassment and peeled off his soiled shirt, tossing it noncommittally to sift for another in the dresser. Another, just as dark, replaced it.

“I’m not doing this to annoy you.”

The sudden serious tone subdued Kagami’s aggression. He watched the shorter man settle on his bed, a melancholic undertone about his features. When not entertaining colleagues, he’d noted the somber air that claimed the man. How calloused eyes would search the sky with a penetrative stare. As if hoping the divine forces of fate would reach out and cleanse the festering guilt.

He’d known some about the five men Izuki lost to Aomine. The charter members tended to keep to their own kind and few things were ever disclosed between Fire and Shadow. He had seen or encountered at least half of them as a youngster while neglecting his regimented tutoring in search of exercise. Stories filled in the gaps. All five men were people Izuki cherished like family, raising them under his tutelage at young ages. Whether the closeness was reciprocated was speculative. Upon reflection, Kagami did recall one. Mitobe Rinnosuke was renowned for his pure qualities. His silence, though frustrating to the many who did not understand him, his culinary ingenuity, and his selflessness. Fond memories assaulted Kagami. He remembered the private cooking lessons
convened between him and the silent shadow. It had served him well, considering he’d recently been emancipated from Akashi and lived on his own within the smithing village. As royalty, he wasn’t expected to provide for himself. Which did not settle well with Kagami at all. The loss of Mitobe had spurred Kagami to convince Izuki to train him alongside other Shadow Apparitions.

The neglected memory, suppressed by his selfish pride, weighed heavy.

Of course, Kagami had sought to assassinate Aomine because of those five agents.

But Mitobe had been the catalyst.

And, for an unprecedented moment, Kagami had forgotten.

He hung his head in apology.

“I’m sorry, Izuki-senpai.”

“We both lost something to that man, Kagami. Those boys were like the sons I couldn’t have. And each of them died fulfilling an oath.” The tone undulated with defeat and indignation. “Assassins are not cold-hearted. Not incapable of love or human emotion. But to kill them, as talented as they were,” Kagami tipped his gaze to meet smoldering black eyes. “Aomine Daiki is a monster.”

He swallowed the rock in his throat. It was rare for the spymaster to express hatred or sadness. But to exude both was unnerving.

“I’m sorry I failed, Izuki-senpai,” he said, unsure if he was making the right move. “But I won’t screw up next time.”

“You wouldn’t even have to endanger yourself if not for me,” the man sighed, straightening himself and running a shaky hand through his hair. “Getting attached to those boys and then sending them off to slaughter. Maybe I’m heartless.”

“Then what does that make parents?” The man stared, confused. “The men and women of every kingdom, of every temple, of every nation, love their children no differently than you loved those boys, senpai. And then when they grow up, they go to war. For their parents. For their nation, or kingdom, or temple.” Izuki’s characteristically content face dissolved. “Hanamiya, Haizaki, Moriyama, Mitobe, and Kuroko. You didn’t push them into anything they hadn’t already agreed to. Just like you’re not pushing me.”

A broken sob firmed his mouth closed and he slumped sheepishly. Dammit. He’d gone and run his mouth again.

“I’m sorry. It wasn’t my place to—”

“No,” the man said through a sniff. “No, it’s fine.”

It was an awkward few moments for Kagami before Izuki looked at him again. His eyes were stained pink and nose erubescent.

“You have a way with words, Kagami.”

He clammed up and fidgeted, palming his neck. “I just don’t like it when people talk down about themselves.”

The man’s laugh was contagious and he chuckled along with him. When the ambiance of crickets
and neighborhood chatter returned, Kagami encouraged a curious thought and asked, “What was he like?”

Slouching comfortably, Izuki’s sodden face warmed. “Kuroko, right?” He hummed affirmatively. “Kuroko Tetsuya was an oddball. Very profound despite his reticence. Half the time I forgot he was there.” He quirked an incredulous brow and a fond smile creased Izuki’s mouth. “Ever since he was a boy, he’s always maintained this phantom-like presence. He could be standing at your side but you wouldn’t recognize him unless he spoke or you bumped into him. Kuroko came to me from Germany, from a halfway house near the capitol as an orphan. I wasn’t told much about his family, and I didn’t ask. Akashi allowed me to keep him only after I convinced him—”

“You make him sound like a pet,” Kagami couldn’t resist chortling.

“Well, I did almost put a bell around his neck.”

They laughed again and when they calmed, Izuki continued. “I educated him, taught him basic combat and perseverance, and, once he was old enough, I put him in his own apartment. He loved sports and outdoor competition, but couldn’t always keep up with the others. Moriyama and Haizaki would tease him, and Mitobe would always be quick to mitigate any confrontations between him and Haizaki.”

His hand flew up in pause. “Wait a second, Kuroko got into confrontations with that guy? Wasn’t he that delinquent punk who got ridiculed almost daily by Akashi?”

Izuki nodded. “Also got strapped to the flagpole for a week and a half in the winter because he defied attending Akashi’s birthday party.”

An uneasiness tightened Kagami’s face. Definitely sounds like Akashi. He dared to ask, “What happened between them?”

“Kuroko dissented to an opinion Haizaki had about morality and Haizaki didn’t like the tone Kuroko used. Only a few of their conflicts had ever been physical. After Moriyama and Haizaki fell to Aomine, Kuroko insisted I train him in the assassin arts. He was very concise with his reasoning: this cannot stand. He did not appreciate Aomine’s actions then in the same way you don’t now.”

He nodded in understanding.

“I spent many years cultivating his abilities, taking advantage of his clever use of observation and misdirection. Small contracts were given to test him and he delivered beautifully. He was surprisingly delicate in the way he killed Neutrals and fugitives. Then Aomine took Mitobe’s life and something within him changed. Beneath that listless veneer was a ferocity I had never perceived. In the weeks leading up to the assignment, Kuroko’d been exceptionally cruel.” The man’s brows knit pensively. “Reflecting now, he had been so hurt by the loss of the others that he wanted to hurt Aomine in the worst possible ways before killing him. And it showed with each contract I gave him before deciding he was ready.” Izuki craned his head back and set his gaze to the ceiling. “And I pray every day that his contempt was not the source of his defeat.”

Kuroko clutched Aomine’s shirt as he listened. He needed to anchor himself as his body quaked
through the emotional torrent. Hardly ever had he heard Izuki speak so openly about his feelings. It wasn’t a matter of a man’s pride that the spymaster withheld his emotions. Rather, he’d been hardened through more than a century of esoteric sleuthing where the less the enemy deduced about you, the longer you lived. He had always welcomed the fatherly advances of his mentor, even as an adult. But Izuki was right.

After losing Haizaki and Moriyama he’d turned cold. Consumed only by the desire to bring suffering and perdition upon the one responsible for bereaving his mentor. His fictive father.

In the end, he failed. Shaming Izuki and his compatriots.

Moisture stung his eyes. But he ignored the response and tuned in to the other room as voices sounded again.

“Well, I’m not done with Aomine yet,” Kagami said. “It wasn’t much, but I got a good taste of what he can do. I just need to outmaneuver and decommission his shadow.”

“Shadow,” Izuki inquired, tone stern. “The Ice doesn’t possess shadows, Kagami.”

“Aomine does. You saw the contract.”

Kuroko’s pulse skyrocketed and dread consumed him. He wasn’t entirely certain if the prince came to the realization that “Tetsu” was “Kuroko Tetsuya.” But the spymaster would. For thirty-four years, he diligently abstained from contacting Izuki. From letting his mentor know he was, in fact, alive. He had kept his presence minimal with each of the assassins who had come for his partner specifically to prevent the man’s expected vengeance. And at some point he had been identified. Knowing he was alive meant Izuki would invite more calamities upon Aomine until he was returned home safe. Something Kuroko now feared. More than just attachment to his partner kept him within the temple walls and he intended to return. Someday, when the tension between the Ice, Lightning, and Fire abated, he would reconnect with the spymaster and seek forgiveness. Just not today.

“Who is it?”

“Not sure,” Kagami replied and he exhaled a stiff breath. “It was some little shorty who assaulted me with those creepy shadows.”

“These creepy shadows?”

The prince shrieked and the chair squealed against the floorboards as Kuroko suspected the man had reared back. “Yes, those. Now put them away, they’re disgusting.”

For a moment, his suspicions were slaked. Most Shadow Apparitions used their shadows in such a way. Children discovered the elementary talent in the shade of the summer sun and excelled at harassing each other with them. Kuroko was no exception, as Kagami was now aware.

Izuki’s ceasing laughter diverted his focus.

“Find anything useful in the dossier?”

“A bit,” Kagami confessed. “Learned a few things I would never have associated with the guy.” The spymaster inquired further and the prince continued, “Like that he’d actually been married once for twenty years.”
Aomine squeezed Kuroko responsively and he peeked to see his partner’s face tense with scrutiny.

“Got gored once by an elk, too,” Kagami pressed on. “Looks like it took a push just to get his ass through the Academy, too.”

“You weren’t the brightest either.”

“Okay listen, bitch.”

Aomine snorted and Kuroko whisked a hand to cover his partner’s mouth. A silent argument occurred as they locked eyes.

Lucky for them the two had started laughing again.

“Anything particularly useful?” Izuki prompted.

The chair shuffled. “Yeah, there’s some notes I—”

“Kagami?”

“What the hell is this?” The voice is both startled and angry, but contained.

Kuroko patted Aomine’s chest and when the man looked down, he mouthed, “We need to go.”

His partner held up a finger, signaling to wait.

“It’s your blade,” Izuki deadpanned.

Wood screeched against wood. “Aomine had my sword,” Kagami argued and for a moment, he’s silent.

Kuroko envisioned the contorted expression upon flipping the blade over. And why wouldn’t the prince inspect his property after having been in unfamiliar hands? An unpleasant feeling sizzled his spine and he patted Aomine again, only to get ignored. Footfalls crept to the forgery portal and his heart clenched tight.

He bit Aomine’s arm and acquired the man’s full attention.

The lost stare was replaced by a similar anxiety and he willed the blackness to absorb them.

As if the floor had given way, they fell into the dark and disappeared.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Must suck for you, huh, Aomine?” The only word he understood was his name, as the man had referred to that annoying Apparition vernacular.

He nudged Tetsu. “Kick him.”

“Flirting,” the voice was low and singsong and Aomine quickly jabbed the shadow’s side.

Kagami threw him a questioning look as Tetsu doubled over but Aomine shrugged innocently.

Chapter Notes

As always thank you for the kudos! Now that it's getting to the nitty-gritty, I've been double checking my notes and proofreading everything at least ten times. I hope you continue to enjoy this barf : D

The morning had been arguably taxing for Aomine. Another of Tetsu’s wakeup calls, about as charitable as the others, had woken him to a busy temple and even busier pavilion as people rushed about, unloading shipments of resources from overseas. Perishables, furniture, textiles, all imported from the American territory. That it coincided with the departure for the Fire’s Japanese capitol only annoyed Aomine more. Insomnia and intense midnight retrospection worsened his mood.

It had been a whole day since he and Tetsu had snuck into Kagami’s home in the smithing village and overheard the exchange with the spymaster. Before then, he hadn’t been aware of the shadow’s relationship to Izuki Shun or the four assassins he terminated. Knowing now that Tetsu had felt so furious and intended to make him suffer before death bothered him. He questioned their bond and considered that maybe the shadow still harbored those spiteful feelings. Then there was Kagami. The prince was earning points with him and not all necessarily good. While he intended to perpetuate their competition as long as possible, he wasn’t pleased with the way the man was making himself familiar with his personal information. His marriage was none of Kagami’s business, nor that elk accident, and definitely not his lackluster academic standing.

On the boat ride across the Sea of Japan, he tried to convince himself of two things. First, that if Tetsu had been duplicitous these past thirty-four years, secretly resenting his very presence and friendly advances, he more than deserved it. And he planned to muster the fortitude to prostrate himself in apology. And second, that the information the prince garnered from the dossier would only serve to spur their pugnacious energies and, should Kagami delve further, it may not even warrant much hostility. There were only so many things Aomine ever publicized about himself, that is to say nothing of the spurious gossip overheard along the promenades of the temple.

He had entertained the idea of performing his own reconnaissance, having Tetsu collect some
scandalous information on the prince for him, but decided not to. Whether the man wanted it or not, his celebrity status as an heir had put him in more than just newspapers and textbooks. If he hung around the pavilion long enough, he’d intercept enough dirt to twist the prick and elicit a desirable reaction.

He and the rest of Imayoshi’s contingent arrived in Fukushima early that afternoon. Along with him and Kuroko, Momoi and Wakamatsu had also joined. Kurokawa Castle was large, a testament of Japan’s Edo period, along with hundreds more. An indomitable fortress, it served as both a military stronghold and seat of political power. War had crippled its usefulness and since then it had been rebuilt and maintained as the epicenter of Fire Apparition power. Imayoshi led the way through the halls bathed by the refractive sunlight of neighboring rooms. Traditional to Japanese castles, few rooms were closed off. Save for one on the second floor, where outside stood the half-pint Lord of the Fire.

Akashi Seijuurou.

To the man’s left was an average-looking brunet with nervous eyes. Past introductions escaped him and Tetsu quietly reminded him of the name. Furihata Kouki, Akashi’s Ambassador. To the Lord’s right was a taller man. Silky black hair framed a feminine face, but Aomine knew better than to assume the man was incapable of violence. Mibuchi Reo was the War Administrator of the Fire, after all. Many an incursion had been conducted under Mibuchi’s watch. The excessively sweet voice was just one of many charms that disarmed unsuspecting people. Then behind Furihata, Aomine saw him. Looking like a giant black backdrop against Akashi’s Ambassador, Kagami stood silently, his face already laced with a scowl. He felt the man’s stare searing his forehead as greetings underwent and the group filtered into the meeting hall. Uncharacteristic of the castle’s Asiatic origins, a large western table centered the room, seating twenty. Placards designated the seating arrangements.

Aomine found his nametag and slid into his seat, thankful for the plush cushion. Akashi liked to play with his food and if he had to suffer the same indignity as the others of the temple, he wanted a comfortable seat.

Tetsu settled in on his right.

The Ice and Fire seated and small talk between Momoi, Wakamatsu, Furihata, and Mibuchi permeated the stiff air for a few minutes.

His leg bounced apprehensively and he folded over the table. Tetsu shunned his poor etiquette with a poke to the ribs. Aomine tipped his gaze to tell the shadow where to stuff it but his eyes landed elsewhere.

Beside Tetsu, a pair of fiery eyes stared.

Withholding surprise, he lifted on his elbows. But his face must have betrayed him as Kagami flashed a placard, reading “Kagami T. Translator.”

The condescending grin the bastard flashed stunted his confusion.

“Must suck for you, huh, Aomine?” The only word he understood was his name, as the man had referred to that annoying Apparition vernacular.

He nudged Tetsu. “Kick him.”

“Flirting,” the voice was low and singsong and Aomine quickly jabbed the shadow’s side.
Kagami threw him a questioning look as Tetsu doubled over but Aomine shrugged innocently.

A raucous chatter disturbed the table as the awaited party ushered inside.

As the Fire and Ice members started rising to greet the Lightning, Aomine reminded Tetsu about etiquette and received a nasty glare. Hyuuga entered first, followed by his wife and secretary, Riko. They made for an eccentric and terrifying pair and Aomine had silently wondered why she hadn’t headed the military rather than that lunatic Hayakawa. The party funneled into their chairs and when the entire assembly had been seated, the meeting began.

Fate spited Aomine. The majority of the discussion was performed entirely in English and he strained his attention to keep up. Context clues did little to fill in the gaps and he instead found himself absentmindedly glancing from one face to another. He was only distracted when either Hayakawa or his loudmouthed doppelganger, Wakamatsu, roared in dissention to either Akashi’s or Imayoshi’s proffered claims. Tetsu’s silence comforted him, at least. Brief clips of the subject matter translated to him, as Kagami and Sakurai would reiterate a misunderstood point to their sovereigns. Seemed like Imayoshi was being persecuted about the border hostilities. Which was no good.

The Dan had been getting petty slaps on the wrist for the past three decades so far. It was only a matter of time before the Fire snapped and called the man in to answer for the negligence.

His eyes then found Hyuuga, and his electric blond hair, and he wondered.

Why was the Lightning’s intervention here necessary?

As he sifted through his limited mental resources, he noticed distant motion in the corner of his eye. That little secretary of the Kaizer’s was looking at him again.

He locked eyes with Sakurai Ryou and the man visibly quailed. It felt like the sovereigns had been hashing it out with each other for an hour or more by now—Aomine would never know, with how inept he was at distinguishing time—and he’d caught the secretary giving him furtive glances all meeting long.

What was the man’s problem?

He felt an elbow gingerly pop his afflicted side and Tetsu mouthed to pay attention.

Begrudgingly he sat up straight and took his eyes off the little man.

—

The air around Kuroko was palatable. Forced passiveness vibrated from his left and sustained belligerence oozed from his right. Truth be told, he was impressed that Aomine and Kagami managed to meet without first resorting to violence. Their brief exchange before the meeting was also relatively benign. But now that the debate had come to its precipice, Kagami’s civility had eroded and the man’s ever-mounting anger towards Aomine had come into effect. And it’s not like Kuroko didn’t understand why.
He told Aomine it would be a bad idea to deface the prince’s weapon and then return it to him as a show of competition.

Yet Aomine had insisted. And so Kuroko followed.

Only now to be sandwiched between two men who wanted nothing more than to brawl with each other until one submitted and offered his head. Keeping up with them would be exhausting.

He believed he had done well to maneuver Aomine into lighter spirits and redirect him from what had transpired the other night. His perspicacity hadn’t allowed him to ignore his partner’s distracted stare and emotional distance. Nor was he unaware of the thoughts weighing the man’s mind. Had he felt bitter about the agents Aomine killed? Absolutely. Accelerated to outrage once indefinitely bonded. Years were spent in silence, where he acquiesced to every order with cold indifference. More than once as Aomine slept, he contemplated risking electrocution to avenge the memory of the men he’d considered family. But the familiarity and generous attitude, displayed even to an incarcerated enemy-turned-servant, derailed him. Somehow, despite the altercation, Aomine never abused or disrespected him. Kuroko was irresistibly drawn to the vibrancy and his ugly hatred had been soothed.

As he’d watched the man brood out the window, he realized that one day they would speak of the incidents. One day when Aomine’s mind wasn’t torn apart with reflection, guilt, and competition. And proximity to Kagami would only exacerbate it.

He thought of magnets. At one moment attracting each other, and repelling the next.

He felt a faint brush against his shirt.

From his right.

Tucked stealthily behind folded arms, Kagami motioned with a note.

Kuroko returned a skeptical look as he eased it from the man’s fingers.

The prince tipped his head in Aomine’s direction and Kuroko reflexively glanced to his partner. The man was hunched over the table and remained attentive to the meeting but was entirely lost.

Stern resilience in the man’s eyes commanded he pass the paper to Aomine.

Not wanting to draw attention, he complied.

He bumped his partner discreetly.

——

Aomine eyed the slip peeking beneath his arm. He glanced sidelong to Tetsu and identified the assuring look in the shadow’s eyes. It was one thing for him and Satsuki to pass notes during board meetings. But Tetsu?

Shielding the paper strip with his arm, he thumbed it open.

You fucked up my blade.
A subtle smirk hooked his mouth and he swallowed a snort. Kagami’s handwriting was more deplorable than his. He resisted shooting a snarky look over at the prince and scribbled his response, dropping the slip into Tetsu’s lap.

*If you don’t like it, can I have it?*

The return was swift and he swore he heard the man mutter in more of that horrible English. *You can wait. You and it will be reacquainted real soon.*

This was bad. Aomine could feel the grin widening on his face and the energy bubbling within him. Gestating a moment, he decided to try goading Kagami into a physical reaction. Any more prodding and he wouldn’t be able to contain himself. At least if the prince caused a scene first, he could avoid blame and Wakamatsu’s subsequent screeching.

*You’re just pissy because I broke into your house, not because I gave back your sword. Get over yourself.*

Tetsu sighed dejectedly and handed the paper over again. Nearly a minute passed before the slip was in his possession again. The written words had him bristling and a hot pain shot through his chest.

*I can get over trespassing. But you? You’re still racking your pea-brain because you still think Imayoshi isn’t lying to you. Guess what, buddy. He is. Just accept it.*

Insult crinkled the paper beneath his fingers. That was one less thing he wanted to think about. Overwritten by infiltrating the smithing village and overhearing Izuki Shun and the prince, Aomine almost buried the matter. As he did with expert ease about most things.

But Kagami was proving excellent at knowing which buttons to push. Which was fine.

Because Aomine was likewise adjusting.

*I beat you. Twice.*

Tetsu delivered the slip once again. Then silence. He heard a growl and cut a glance to Kagami. The man’s eyes were piercing and enraged. Feral energy swarmed between them and bathed Aomine’s nerves with vigor. At the most subtle twitch of Kagami’s finger, he shot up out of his chair.

Kuroko leapt into action when his partner’s chair hit the floor, followed no later than a second by Kagami’s. Stuck between lashing arms, he braced himself against Aomine and leaned hard into the larger body. Shadows laced up the prince’s legs and torso. He helplessly pushed against Kagami’s chest to deter him. Despite his intervention, the two jostled for freedom, cursing and shouting obscenities at each other. Aomine drove forward and he felt his footing slipping. He geared the confines to coil around and arrest Kagami’s arms from meeting his partner’s face.

Somewhere between their wrestling and deep baritones, he pleaded with them to stop. Handling just one of them was manageable. But two of them? Impossible. He just wasn’t big enough.
“Taiga. Daiki.”

Though smooth, the voice was like a gunshot. They froze.

Akashi Seijuurou, red-gold eyes peeking above steepled fingers, stared right at them.

Slowly he relaxed and the black vines slithered from Kagami’s form to the shaded space below the table. Aomine shoved the man’s shoulder and was replied to with a punch to the chest.

“Enough.” Another word softly uttered, but carried with intensity, straightened the guilty to attention.

Kuroko opened his mouth to apologize, but Akashi spoke first.

“Both of you, hands behind your back.” Neither hesitated. “Shadow-kun, bind them.”

Knowing better than to defy the Lord’s order, he consented and manipulated the shadows pooling around Aomine and Kagami’s feet to thread up and wrap their wrists.

He looked to the sovereign and noted a weak smile beneath tented hands.

“Take a walk.”

Silence befell the meeting hall as the unruly men were escorted out, kept apart by Kuroko who positioned himself between them. Imayoshi had suspected Aomine would provoke Kagami somehow. Given what Susa disclosed about their encounter he concluded that both had wounded pride to redeem. His initial plan had been to leave Aomine behind at the temple, where the guild and combat squad would congregate and prepare for the upcoming battle. Though Imayoshi was confident in his trump card, he was intimately aware of Akashi’s arbitration. While being berated, he had noticed Aomine wasn’t paying attention. Which was fine.

Aomine was leverage. Evidence of the Fire’s preliminary hostility in a time of international unrest.

That the man had acted impulsively, though expected, and was expelled from the debate displeased him. He was running out of time and Aomine was becoming difficult to moderate. Exposure to the crown prince was spoiling the obedience Imayoshi had spent decades earning. His words needed to be both terse and effective. He’d spent months dancing around Akashi’s vapid threats, knowing that the tsunami was swelling and churning, and used the time to acquire the distance, information, and resources necessary to shoulder such a cataclysmic thrashing.

Today would prove whether his fortifications were potent enough to weather the storm.

No matter how the meeting ended, it would come. But he hoped to reduce its power.

The dignitaries muttered among their compatriots about the indecent display and Hyuuga slapping the tabletop a few times reined in attendance. That despicable Russian nonsense flowed from tight lips in controlled ire and disgust, soothed to a whisper by a gentle stroke to the arm by the Kaizer’s wife.

Akashi cleared his throat. “Dan,” he said. “You’ve heard our complaints and have been brought to
light about your transgressions. You are given the floor to rebut.”

Imayoshi withheld a scowl. Transgression was such an ugly word and was more suitable for the heinous barbarism the perimeter dwellers of the Fire exercised when they crushed, melted, and dismembered cowering women and children who foraged for their families near the borderline. The thought, though stirring his fury, strengthened his composure. Head held high and hands at rest in his lap, he began.

“Though I am just as amenable for the genocide occurring at the borderline as you are, Lord,” he caught Akashi’s faint squint, “a greater injustice has come to my attention.”

Perplexed murmurs rounded the table. The perpetual furrow of Hyuuga’s brow deepened and the Lord leaned forward.

“More egregious than genocide, you say? Whatever could it be?”

He deflected the mockery and dove right in. “Your Kagami Taiga physically assaulted Aomine Daiki within our territory.”

Hushed voices and gasps crossfaded his declaration. A whisper of dread from his left pleased him. Momoi Satsuki covered her agape mouth, eyes transfixed in bewilderment. The pen shook between her dainty fingers as she recorded the revelation.

Immediately Hyuuga interjected, “Bullshit, you can’t prove that.”

“Quiet down, four eyes,” Wakamatsu hissed defensively.

Sakurai squeezed in to calm the tension only to have his War Administrator turn on the little brunet. Hyuuga nearly rose to Wakamatsu’s aggression had Akashi not intervened. When everyone was once again silent and apprehensive, the Lord gestured for him to finish.

“The attack happened three days ago. The details have been sparse, as I have not had an interview with Aomine to confirm—”

Hyuuga did not hesitate to rebuke, “Bullshit, like I said.”

“However,” the emphasis of importance pursed the man’s lips indignantly. “I do have a confession from the nurse who treated him hours after the confrontation for a second degree burn not obtained by accident but malicious intent.”

Akashi reclined and threw Imayoshi a look of feigned interest. “Is that so?”

He produced the outpatient log from the assortment of papers in front of him and heard Momoi suck a sharp breath. “Momoi-san,” he hovered the paper below her eyes. “If you’d kindly corroborate.”

Shaken eyes, laced with ridicule, scrutinized him and she claimed the sheet. Few things ever disheveled the powerful mien of confidence she wore and he reminded himself, as she collected herself before the audience waiting eagerly around her, that it was not his hobby to torment people. But her testimony was crucial to his argument and he needed her to deliver.

“I treated Aomine-kun, three days ago, for a second degree burn afflicted to his waist between the iliac crest and twelfth rib. Obtained within six hours of treatment, I applied the necessary medicine, including bandages, antiseptic, and ointment, and prescribed naproxen sodium tablets to suppress inflammation.” Her body, though firm with practiced exposure to political intercourse, was tight
with discordant emotions. Resentment, insult, and uneasiness fought for control. But she expertly subjugated her features as Akashi spoke.

“And did Aomine-kun disclose his attacker?”

A silent battle waged between the embittered woman and the Lord, where neither said a word. They merely stared in contest for a pregnant moment.

“He refused.”

Disappointment punched his gut. He’d hoped a little more input from her would embellish his case. But Aomine had privatized the incident and it had hurt that his nephew hadn’t thought to report to Imayoshi concerning an assassination attempt on his life. By a Fire Apparition. A monumental twist of fate that the man had ignored.

And for what?

To perpetuate schoolyard harassment with the prince to occupy his boredom.

“This is a waste of time,” Hyuuga snarled belligerently, as sparks of electricity crackled around crossed arms. “It’s obvious you’re just scrambling for salvation because you’ve screwed yourself out of every deal we’ve dangled over your head to save your pathetic temple. Good thing you never set foot on my doorstep or you wouldn’t have your little slice of China wilderness anymore.”

Imayoshi did not tame the glare he sent the Kaizer. “Is that a declaration of war?”

The electricity thickened and covered the man’s chest and neck. “Cross the border and find out.”

“Gentleman,” Akashi said with a monotonous calm that annoyed him.

Like shunned children they came into line.

“The Dan’s statement is true.”

The room bellowed with contention. He watched as the Lord’s contingent desperately beseeched the man for the truth. Hayakawa and Hyuuga’s vehement refusals blended as they censured the Lord’s mendacity. Along with no sense of humor, much like that whelp Kuroko, Akashi rarely told a lie. Even if he did, he arrogantly eluded responsibility and assured the deception was necessary to achieve attractive goals.

Regaining the assembly’s attention went ignored as the Lord continued in lieu of the cacophonous complaining. “Taiga accepted a contract from my spymaster that he sought to fulfill. I confronted him about his mission success and he told me he failed.”

Expectedly, the honeyed voice of Akashi Seijuurou soothed the assembly.

As if for emphasis, the man summated, “Kagami Taiga attacked Aomine Daiki first.”

Victory was festering to the point of overflow and it took all of his energy to contain his exuberance. To gauge the Lord’s thoughts, he taunted, “Which leads to only one solution.”

The Lightning bristled and the Fire festered.

This was it.

He had won.
“The annexation of the Ice.”

Confusion teemed among his compatriots as they looked between each other. Flustered eyes hooked him and trepidation drowned his confidence.

“You can’t do that,” Wakamatsu spat.

“Annexation is an excessive use of force against someone who has—” Mibuchi interrupted Momoi curtly.

“Against a government who has resisted all means of peace and has perpetuated international discord through the unlawful methods of guerilla warfare, trespassing, and kidnapping.”

Imayoshi couldn’t defend himself, as Akashi segued into dialogue. “We have tolerated your pessimistic approach to compromise and fielded your lack of control over villager vigilantism with patience. We have given you countless chances to reverse the damage you’ve irreparably caused. And now you have left us with no choice. This is our final deal, Dan.”

He didn’t like the glance he cut across to Hyuuga anymore than he liked the words that followed from the Kaizer’s mouth. “You have forty-eight hours to consider surrendering to the Fire and Lightning crowns, wherein our forces will immediately mitigate public procedure and meliorate the corruption you’ve distended upon your nation. Should you fail to adhere, we will invade and conquer you.”

Emotional control was thrown to the wind. “You will not. Aomine is protected under the 1990 accord, the same as every other Ice Apparition born within the temple.” He hadn’t meant to enforce his words with a snarl, but he forgave his solecism considering the circumstances.

“But Aomine-kun isn’t of the Ice, is he?” Akashi flashed a photocopied document for all eyes to witness. A highlighted strip near the center enraged him. “The agreement states, ‘protection of hostilities against offending parties is inclusive to those born within Apparition territory and possessing appropriate lineage.’”

“Which reinforces my point.”

“No, it does not. The pact recites that those born within the land are protected. But Aomine-kun does not qualify. Though born within an Apparition territory, he does not possess an inkling of the desired lineage.”

Imayoshi bridled his increasing temper and managed, “His mother—my sister—was a pureblooded Ice Apparition. His affiliation is guaranteed.”

“We’re not talking about Imayoshi Nori,” Akashi said. “We’re talking about Aomine Daiki, who is not only illegitimate but a Neutral who does not possesses, nor ever displayed, an inkling of Ice power since his birth.”

He quietly raged. Several cases would confirm that parentage factored into a child’s ethnicity. Genetics were canonical evidence to the matter of nationality, but also a source of intense deliberation when interracial breeding was put into play. But of course, Akashi would overlook it and establish his own credence. More than just to spite him, but to seize control and pressure him into folding, using the threat of usurpation as an inescapable deterrent.

“Aomine Daiki is not an Ice Apparition. He’s a Neutral and therefore not protected. The incident between him and Taiga is stricken from the record.”
He needed a distraction from the diatribe and began massaging his wrist out of sight from the Lord and Kaizer.

“I will say it once more, Dan.” Petulantly he drew his downcast eyes to meet red-gold. “You have forty-eight hours. Either you surrender before then, or face invasion.”

From his peripheral vision he noted the stares of Wakamatsu and Momoi. It had all been a steady stream of events that had now lurched into a nauseating kamikaze spiral into the pits of hell. While confident that he managed to attain some leverage, his suspicions that Akashi would play dirty had allowed him to formulate subsequent plans. Ones that he needed to launch with haste.

Without conferring with his associates, he leaned challengingly forward and said, “Screw you.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Aomine stopped and whistled. “Easy, tiger.”

“Excuse you?”

“Sensitive, are we? What are you so mad about, anyway? It was just a scrimmage.”

He drove a knee forward that the man sidestepped. “It was not, you impudent shit.”

“Fine, play date. Whichever.”

Chapter Notes

I like the I get bursts of material done for TWCH that I can leave in queue as a nice cushion between updates. The three or so days I dedicate to revisions alone is worth it if it means you’re all enjoying it. If even a little. More than anything, this is stretching my writer’s edge some. Now that Imayoshi’s up shit creek without a paddle, what will happen next? Will Aomine quit picking on Kagami? Will Kuroko eventually leave and start a nomadic life away from the two idiots? Who knows.

Anyway, enjoy the chapter c:

No words disrupted their jaunt through the castle halls, allowing Kagami to reflect. Aomine was right. The vandalism of his kodachi hadn’t pissed him off. On the contrary, he was brimming with excitement. It had taken two nights’ worth of sleep for him to accept that the Neutral offered more than just a recurring memory of shame. Though emancipated, Akashi regulated the activities he invested in around the castle and even with the myriad of commitments he had, a hole resided deep. Nothing filled it for long and even his favorite recreational habits only satisfied him temporarily.

But the jubilance that spiked his heart and geared his energies into overdrive. That was something he foresaw becoming addicted to. More than just the irresistible attraction of competition, the man’s unprecedented style had him captivated. Wanting to uncover more of what the man had to offer.

Aomine was interesting prey. Kagami would give the Neutral that.

He cut a sidelong glance. Aomine walked in silence, eyes forward and jaw tight. Then he remembered. Before in the holding cells, when he’d netted the man with insults, retaliation had been curbed. Pain twisted frustrated features and revealed an alluring mystery that Kagami hoped one day to crack. After all, how many people does one meet who cannot properly express anger?

“Take a picture, it lasts longer.”

His eyes cut into focus on a smug grin. “Don’t flatter yourself.”
A slight pinch to the shadow cuffs warned him to resist tempting Aomine, but he ignored them. They rounded a corner into one of many similar-looking stretches of hallway. Sunlight sliced through the balusters of the parapet and bathed the walls with comforting warmth. No attendants roamed this corridor. Which he liked. They’d received too many complex stares on their way to the perimeter of the second floor. And why wouldn’t they? Two large men led in procession like prisoners by a frail little warden was quite a sight. Kagami would share in the amusement if he wasn’t involved.

“Nice to see you aren’t pouting anymore. You’re so ugly when you pout,” he said.

“And you’re so much sweeter when you aren’t bitching about your little dagger.”

“I was supposed to take it back from you, you dick.”

“You’re too slow. The wait alone would have killed me.”

He knew he was being baited but he let himself be swept along. “You’re so insufferable. I should have just killed you when I had the chance.”

“I love you, too.”

He halted and popped the man’s shin with his toe. “Look here, asshole. Don’t get cute with me.”

Aomine stopped and whistled. “Easy, tiger.”

“Excuse you?”

“Sensitive, are we? What are you so mad about, anyway? It was just a scrimmage.”

He drove a knee forward that the man sidestepped. “It was not, you impudent shit.”

“Fine, play date. Whichever.”

“Probably the most attention you’ve gotten since you were born, considering how worthless and undesirable you are.”

The barb ruffled Aomine and the superior countenance faded. “You wanna say that again?”

“Don’t know why I have to keep reminding you. You’re a Neutral. Nothing. A waste of goddamn space.”

That same flash of pain hinted offended features. He wanted to dig deeper and uncover more to that expression. A tight pressure gripped his nape and his forehead connected aggressively with Aomine’s. Shooting pain coursed his brain and he combated the restraints to assuage the ache.

“What the fuck, Tetsu?” he hissed.

“Hey, don’t get familiar, asshole,” Aomine ground out through equally clenched teeth and squinted as if it would flush the pain.

“Since you two insist on squabbling like children, I will punish you like children.” Both tone and stare were absolute.

But he didn’t buckle.

“This isn’t your business. Butt out, Tetsu.”
Aomine stepped close. “Are you deaf?”

“What’re you gonna do, hit me?”

The shadow reached up, grabbed their ears, and tugged down hard. They yelped as they met Tetsu at eye level. The man’s stare was glacial. Kagami swallowed.

“You,” directed to Aomine. “Quit coaxing.” Then to him. “And you may call me Kuroko.”

He wasn’t stupid enough to protest, so he nodded.

“Are we done?”

He shifted a curious glance to Aomine who reciprocated rebellion. He returned the look and shrugged out of the little man’s grasp.

“No, because this asshole forgets his place.”

Aomine dislodged his head and rose to full height. “I’m not gonna keep saying it. I’m from the Ice, you incompetent twit.”

Kagami allowed a playful smirk. “Even more to my advantage then.”

The man snuffed and turned to Kuroko, motioning to him. “Kill him.”

“Oh, bring it on, shorty.”

The shadow bowed and said, “I respectfully decline.” Their protests went ignored as Kuroko continued. “This contest does not involve me. You two started this on your own and that’s how you’re going to finish it.”

“Whoa, hey,” Aomine cut in. “You’re ditching me?”

The shadow didn’t respond to the wounded look with apology. “Absolutely not. But I will not help you fight your battles. Especially ones I did not start.” He noted the displeasure diffusing Aomine’s face. “That being said, I will not let you die.”

Perplexity forced Kagami to interject. “Hold on a damn minute. You just said you weren’t getting involved.”

“That I did.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? His mental torment must have shown because the smaller man smiled. Fighting down the flares now prickling his cheeks and neck, he clenched Kuroko’s head and squeezed. “Now look here you little shit. Don’t get all cute with me. You think I’m an idiot?”

The faint snicker annoyed him and Kuroko pointed up. He followed the finger and noticed no black thread around his wrist. Embarrassment heated his cheeks and he wrenched his hand away.

When had he been released? Aomine was enlightened to his freedom and sputtered only a moment. Both locked eyes on the shadow, whose face masked more pride than willed to be shown.

From down the corridor, a loud voice bellowed. That noisy War Administrator Wakamatsu was saying the meeting concluded and it was time to leave. Kuroko enjoyed a moment of victory and led them back through the same circuit. He couldn’t help but stare admiringly at the smaller man’s back. Such manipulation intrigued him and he silently praised the shadow’s tact. Though annoying,
it deserved acknowledgement. One day he would make it known.

The congregation milled about the expanse of the hallway outside of the meeting room, segregated to their respective parties, sixty feet away. Wakamatsu gained distance and was alerting Imayoshi to the Neutral’s return once they reached the threshold. Hyuuga’s group was disappearing down a flight of stairs beside them, Hayakawa’s grating voice slowly fading. He spotted blackness in the Dan’s face that he didn’t like as the party approached. Imayoshi beckoned his associates to follow upon passing and a nudge from the Neutral adjusted his tracing gaze.

“Don’t miss me too much, Kagami.”

“Kiss my ass.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Aomine sauntered away. He stammered and hooked Kuroko by the collar as the smaller man turned to leave. His flustered expression amused the shadow, if the twinkling eyes were any indication. The unspoken question was succinctly answered with a noncommittal shrug.

“Just don’t tempt him, Kagami-kun.”

—

The return to the castle had felt considerably quicker than departure. Aomine attributed it to his reformed mood. During the boat ride he’d occupied a bunk and entertained the many new ways he could rankle Kagami into a fitting reaction to incite another contest. He was only scratching the surface of the man’s character and the prospect of what lie beneath was exciting. True, the prince’s attitude sucked and never once had he considered it possible to suffer the man’s company for pleasure. Too much effort to emend sour first impressions.

They docked in the bay at nightfall and entered the temple well after hours. Hunger and fatigue hampered his rampant imagination and he planned to satisfy both had Imayoshi not proposed an audience with him and Tetsu. Wakamatsu and Satsuki were discharged and the three of them headed for the Dan’s office. Contrary to conventional practices, the man permitted entry without removing their shoes as sleep sought them all. While being offered tea Aomine wondered why this couldn’t wait until morning. Whatever this was.

Imayoshi settled and began. “We’re facing a crisis. Akashi and Hyuuga are looking to either annex or invade.”

Despite his reduced faculties, the words delivered a sharp punch to his attention. “Wait, what?”

“That conniving snake overlooked my rebuttal and offered only two options. My answer is expected in forty-eight hours.”

Not news to him. Akashi exuded cunning extremism. It was always all or nothing.

“What case did we have against him?” Tetsu asked.

Imayoshi removed his glasses and cleaned the lenses. “That’s irrelevant.”
The response was curt. Which only made him curious about what the Dan had presented. But the man appeared to be reluctant to explain so he allowed it to pass.

“What do you want me to do?”

“You’re to join Nebuya and get to work fortifying defensive lines.” A pad of paper and pen were produced and a message furiously scribbled. “See the chief later today and get started.” He took the sheet and the Dan pointed to Tetsu with the pen. “Kuroko-kun, you’re to remain by Aomine’s side at all times and treat any suspicious activity as hostile.”

The shadow nodded and Imayoshi dismissed them.

On his way out, he stole a glance back. Something had the man in a vice and he hadn’t thought to consider himself responsible. It wasn’t the first time he’d caused a disturbance during a convention and definitely not the first time he’d been ejected. While strolling the promenades to his chamber he made a mental note to revisit the matter with Imayoshi later.

The sleep aids hadn’t performed the desired effect, much to Imayoshi’s disappointment. After excusing Aomine and Kuroko, he tasked a nurse to fetch him a sedative. He managed a light nap and stress washed brain with frustration. His initial plan hadn’t reached completion, suspended once he learned of Aomine’s confrontation with Kagami Taiga. Even if for a while, the Ice could withstand the onslaught long enough for winter to strengthen their natural advantage as it had many times in the past. Had things gone according to plan, Kagami’s assault on Aomine would have resulted in the Ice’s exclusion from combat. The Fire would vicariously wage war in their stead against their northern ally. While postulated to prevent a conflagration of epic proportions, it would have also served to weather the trust between the Lord and Kaizer. After all, they were friends only on paper. The two hardly tolerated each other beyond conference.

As he anticipated the appearance of Susa, contacted shortly after breakfast, he relived the discourse between him and the sovereigns.

What was it Akashi had said?

Though born with an Apparition territory…

The phrasing alerted him. Was the Lord privy to the truth? His clamorous emotions cloaked the room with a frigid chill and the sweat slicking his palms glued his fists shut.

“Didn’t go well, did it?”

He looked to the speaker. Susa surfaced from the darkened corner and knuckles tapped the frosted wall. A deep breath thawed his temper and the ice receded. Gesturing, the shadow sat adjacent at the low table and Imayoshi slid over a tea cup. He decided English best. “The little prick was a step ahead of me.”

Susa accepted the suggestion. “Must have really screwed with you if you’ve resorted to foul language.”

He filled the cup and posited the kettle on a stone coaster. “I wagered the attack on Aomine.”
“Sure that was a good idea? Technically we only had a theory.”

“I wrangled Momoi into confirming the incident, hoping Aomine disclosed the details. But, true to form, he revealed nothing.”

“She may have lied.”

He shook his head. “She’s too loyal.”

“Unsupported evidence only provides so much.” Susa reclined comfortably on an elbow. “What did Akashi say?”

“Kagami confessed to the attack. He knew about the contract and his little brother reported his failure. Despite that, he professed that Aomine was not protected by the 1990 accord due to his Neutrality.”

“Which is nonsense.”

His tone turned grave. “Nonsense he may very well be privy to.”

Susa rose slowly and looked at him grimly. “You’re kidding.” Imayoshi reiterated what Akashi told him about the agreement’s disclaimer and the shadow grimaced. “How could he possibly come into that information? We were careful.”

He groaned and shoved his spectacles up his nose, rubbing his eyes. “Leaks happen. Eliminating all of them will take time we cannot afford.” He glanced to the man’s impatient face and said, “We need to initiate our plan. As soon as possible.”

“What’s our window?”

Imayoshi was confident he wouldn’t receive undue visitors. It was now two in the afternoon and the temple folk were immersed in business or pleasure. Aomine was preoccupied with Nebuya and Kuroko was forbidden to leave his nephew’s side. Momoi and Wakamatsu were likewise busied with an emergency board meeting to inform the directors of the sudden developments. Before breakfast he issued that a statement was to be broadcast via radio later that afternoon, to announce the impending war. He would be allowed repose for at least a few hours.

He brought Susa up to speed, telling him about the ultimatum and the now thirty-eight hours remaining.

“There’s no way in hell you’ll survive for long. Since they dismantled your army sixteen years ago, most officers retired. The fledglings in the combat squad and hunter’s guild are nothing short of cannon fodder.” The shadow emptied the contents of the cup and Imayoshi mechanically topped it off. “None of them are suitable for the plan.”

He traced the lip of his cup pensively. Susa seemed to notice and asked for clarification. A wry smile claimed his mouth.

“I actually have the perfect candidate in mind.”

“Care to elaborate?”

Despite the cushion of security, he leaned close and spoke low. “Aomine Daiki.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

After all, it was no different from Aomine’s agenda. Wasn’t it? The man had been coaxing him during the conference and Kagami wasn’t immune to come-ons.

What was it Kuroko had said?

*Just don’t tempt him.*

Maybe he just might.

Chapter Notes

Curse chapter length variances, right? Setting the flow is so hard but I proofread it a few times to make sure I deliver at least a little something between updates. That being said, look forward to a quick release of chapter XIII tomorrow. I’ve had it sitting in queue, ready to post for a week now (like this one) but have been a bit nervous to post it for fear that I overlook errors or forget to include crucial details. Please enjoy and thank you for sticking with TWCH. (' u')/

Kagami scanned the forest wall. It had been a rigorous twelve hours upon returning to the China castle where he and the military fortified defensive barriers and erected command stations along the borderline. Three zones pocketed the Ice from the south, each commandeered by one of Akashi’s elite. Furihata headed zone two, Mibuchi zone one. Kagami appropriated zone three following a heated argument with his brother. Akashi had been insistent that he remain beyond the battle zone but he refused to be designated a noncombatant simply because of his status.

Wispy towers of charcoal smoke dispersed the evening air from several fires dotting the defensive lines. More than just a means of identification, it also served to inform the Ice when time was up. Destroying nature was never done in malice and proper respects would be paid once the conflict was resolved.

Sleep had come sparingly to Kagami, managing only three hours. He was eager to lend support. Much to his disappointment, his contest with Aomine would have to wait.

As the hours waned, he governed the men under his charge with effective haste to prepare. Drills were conducted, provisions dispensed, and sleeping arrangements organized. By far, it was the largest convergence of men beneath the stars he had ever witnessed. Fatigue dried his eyes but he willed them to comply for a little while longer. He sat before a timber table where he twirled the *kodachi* listlessly. The dossier lay open beside him, covering inventory logs and a dispatchment roster. As his brain turned sluggish he allowed his mind to wander.

Aomine’d infiltrated his thoughts on the boat ride back home. The enigmatic bastard was compromising his integrity as a hunter. Reluctant to accept it at first, he now considered their
compatibility beyond the stage of competition. The man was blessed with impressive skill, an attractive sense of humor, and undeniable charisma. The physique was nothing to sneeze at either. If he was being honest with himself, he liked what he saw. The lean muscled frame belied unperceivable power. Clever hands were hardened from a century of survival. Then there was the prick’s mouth. Sarcastic and gorgeous, whether it was flattering or insulting him. Thinking back now, he wasn’t surprised that he allowed the attraction. His last relationship ended on a sour note and all of his time since was committed to the spymaster’s tutelage. Aomine provided a much needed outlet for his frustration and, so long as he reminded himself of the ultimate goal, he could shamelessly use the man to exhaust his retainer. And with the allure of future bouts, he was eager to satisfy his need of physical contact. After all, it was no different from Aomine’s agenda. Wasn’t it? The man had been coaxing him during the conference and Kagami wasn’t immune to come-ons.

What was it Kuroko had said?

*Just don’t tempt him.*

Maybe he just might.

“Kagami.”

He perked and twisted in his chair. Izuki stood at the mouth of the tent. He let the blade clang to the tabletop and stood to attend to the man. The spymaster held a desisting hand. Silently he thanked the charity and sunk into the seat again.

A rolled poster was flashed and he cleared the table clutter. Izuki unrolled and weighted the sheet. His tired eyes traced the recognizable image. A battle formation drawn on a scaled map of the terrain encompassing the temple, cropped to within one hundred and fifty feet of the north-south borderlines. Where Hyuuga and Akashi’s defensive perimeter was set up. A system of color-coded arrows speared toward the center of the temple, cutting across the sea of villages hugging the structure.

“We’ve already received agreement from Furihata and Mibuchi to use the Stardust Maneuver,” the spymaster said and continued on to explain the movement’s design. Akashi’s three stations would encircle the southern hemisphere of the Ice territory, meeting Hyuuga’s four stations from the north. Together they would plunge inward, subduing the villages, and make their way to the center where the armies would disperse and dominate the capitol.

He approved and Izuki rewound the map. He was told to await further orders in the morning and urged to catch as many hours of sleep as he could manage. Rest became scarce during wartime. The man excused himself. Kagami collapsed onto the cot, uniform and all, and drifted off.

—

Aomine’s emotions clashed. The revelation earlier that morning brought with it more than unwanted anxiety. Respite hadn’t come graciously to him and he was getting fed up. No distraction lasted long enough to remind him that there was actually time to relax. Not since his first encounter with Kagami Taiga had he maintained more than a day of peace. And it was showing. Both Tetsu and Satsuki had flashed those annoying concerned looks and it took all of his energy not to snap at them.
While he discussed battle tactics with Nebuya that afternoon, he noticed the pair whispering to each other. On any other day, he would ignore it. Satsuki’s charming giggles received by Tetsu’s handsome smile. The thought crossed his mind to revert to delinquency and progress their despicably slow development with petty antics. He may not have been one hundred percent accurate when he said Tetsu was horribly incompetent at interpreting romantic advances. Furtive observation showed that, while Satsuki wasn’t as guarded about her intentions, the shadow did everything to promote emotional distance. Which bothered him. Aomine wasn’t bright in some areas, be it from inexperience or disinterest, but he knew pining when he saw it. And both were horribly conspicuous.

And maybe it was his oversensitivity today, but it was pissing him off.

Among his other obligations to fulfill, he ranked “ream Tetsu a new one for skirting Satsuki’s interest” near the top of the list.

He eased a glance to the portal where his partner and ex-wife were still communing. The casual gesture in his direction from Satsuki irked him and he viciously twisted the leather belt he was polishing in retaliation.

He was fine, dammit.

They needed to stop talking about him. Within his presence, no less.

Ignoring a comforting clap on the back from Nebuya, he hollered for the shadow to assist with preparing gear. Imayoshi’s announcement had gone out a few hours ago and with the influx of Apparitions joining the fight, he and Nebuya’s contingent had been tasked to retrieve uniforms and refurbish equipment. Tetsu had been helping until Satsuki requested an audience that was going on its third hour.

Tetsu hurriedly bowed in apology to Satsuki and snaked through the men moving about the barracks. He handed the shorter man a box of boots that needed shining. The chatter of the men faded as the dull throb of worry flooded his agitated brain once more.

He remained as passive as possible while the three worked but his ministrations to the equipment were noticeably tense. Tetsu knew better than to say anything in front of unfamiliar company and for that he was grateful. As well as Nebuya’s slow uptake to him abusing the belts and boots he tended to. The very real thought that, once overcome, he would be one of the first of the Ice erased from existence terrified him. Whether he truly believed it or not, Akashi and Hyuuga put faith in his Neutral status. And that meant something. The sovereigns wouldn’t hesitate to throw the hammer of justice at him. Killing one hundred and twenty Shadow Apparitions was a violation of some obscene law Akashi would fabricate to embellish Aomine’s prosecution.

Why couldn’t those bastards consider an alternative? As someone who’s inherently powerless, what other choice did he have but to kill his aggressors? He hadn’t provoked any of the men or women who’d hunted him like an animal. He didn’t know them yet they knew all about him. Then there was Kagami. Would the prince abandon their contest and kill him? Gloating about his recognized Neutrality with that attractive smirk and those resplendent eyes as the kodachi pierced his heart?

The world was laughing at him. At his strife. At his helplessness. At his infirmity.

Scorn evolved into fury and a hot pain ricocheted through him. The undignified cry alerted both Nebuya and Tetsu.
The chief ceased reparations and nudged him. “Did you pinch yourself?”

“No,” he hissed through a tight jaw. He had meant to corral his temper but the pain resided and escalated. It scorched his fingertips and he dropped the equipment to the floor. “God fucking dammit.”

Nebuya palmed his nape and rubbed bulky fingers into the muscle. “Easy, man. Calm down.”

The applied force wasn’t helping much but to save face, Aomine attempted to receive it. A cursory glance showed that look he so hated claiming Tetsu’s face. Irritation only increased the pain and he shrugged out of the chief’s hold.

“Is it the things the Dan said, Aomine-kun?”

“I just don’t need this bullshit right now.” His head fell into his hands and he massaged his forehead. “I don’t need Akashi Seijuurou and Hyuuga Junpei loosing the guillotine this soon.”

“Is that it,” the chief asked.

He shot a glare to Nebuya. “Not like you’ve ever been hunted like a fucking animal. You’re not a…” He stopped himself. Neutral would not cross his lips.

“Aomine, you’re a stellar hunter and a seasoned warrior. You have any idea how many men in our outfits would shit themselves or go insane with as many times as you’ve been targeted by the Shadow? You’ve made a name for yourself as a man not to be fucked with. And Akashi Seijuurou and Hyuuga Junpei will learn the same lesson.”

He tried to receive the optimism but his resistance translated and the chief resigned with a sigh.

“I know exactly what you need.” Though skeptical, he waited. “Let’s hit the mat. You could stand to pack on some more muscle.”

Exercise was always a welcome distraction. But when the stakes were this high, he couldn’t afford to be lax. He declined with a grunt. Nebuya persisted, as the brute always had, and elbowed him in the ribs. Hitting the burn. A new wave of pain assaulted him and he recoiled violently with a wail.

Tetsu sprung up and hurried to his side. He clutched the pulsing wound and bit his lip, pleading for the ache to subside. Nebuya remained distanced and apprehensive.

“Holy shit, Aomine. What’d I do?”

“Nothing,” was his immediate reply as his body tightened. He resisted the comfort of the futons they’d been sitting on.

Slowly he inclined and lifted his palm from the heat of the wound. His breath was uneven and quick.

“I hardly touched you.”

“Just tender. Slept on it wrong.”

“No, that’s something else entirely. Let me see.” Without delay and ignoring Tetsu’s protests, the bigger man wrenched his shirt up. “What the hell.”

He mustered the strength to cope with the pain and slapped the man’s brick-like hand. “It was an accident.”
“Like hell it was.” The chief rose swiftly and tugged him by the arm. “You need to see the doctors right away.”

Dread propelled him to his feet and he disentangled the grip. “No.” He yanked Nebuya by the collar and affixed a resolute stare, keeping his voice quiet. “This does not leave the barracks. Don’t force me to come up with a clever way to embarrass you. Just keep your mouth shut and let me deal with this on my own.” To reinforce his point, he jerked the man’s collar. “You understand?”

“Whoa, easy with the temper. Just sit down a second.”

For once he followed the chief’s advice and sunk slowly onto the platform. His pride was nearing its limit and he scooted to the plush futon where he lay back. A wave of pain ravaged without origin and he rolled onto his uninjured side. The display disconcerted Nebuya as the man stammered for the right words.

Grief washed over him as the incendiary ache became unbearable and he withstood the moisture stinging his eyes. “Go find Satsuki.”

Nebuya didn’t linger and he waited until the progressive thumping of boots faded before giving into the anguish suddenly consuming him. His body shuddered and tears leaked.

Tetsu settled beside his head and searched for his hand, which he allowed to be grasped. The squeeze was comforting but did nothing to allay the unwanted feeling racing through him. The shadow’s voice was calm as it assured him everything was okay. But the words were uncertain and he didn’t need to see Tetsu’s face to know it was contorted with alarm.

“What the hell’s wrong with me, Tetsu?” Weakness claimed his tone.

But he didn’t care. And neither did his partner as a trembling hand stroked his head.

“What is it, Aomine-kun?”

“It hurts,” he said. “Everything fucking hurts.”

“The burn is five days old, it’s still healing.”

The words came quickly. “It’s not the burn. Well, it is, but it’s not.”

Tetsu glided a hand to his face and thumbed away new tears. “The anger.”

“Every time. Every time I get pissed it starts tingling. Like someone’s poking me with needles. And the more upset I get, the worse the pain.” As if to compound his already agitated mental state he had to add emotional instability onto his outstanding resume of insufficient faculties. “Who the fuck feels like this just from being angry?”

The shadow said nothing. Resignation was felt through the grip to his hand.

“I don’t know, Aomine-kun. I’m sorry, but I just don’t know.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

If Akashi was looking to distract him, it wouldn’t work. “What could I have possibly done to you this time? I already told you, I’m not sitting this out.”

“And I don’t expect you to.” Uncharacteristic annoyance weighed the tone and Akashi pushed a finger into his chest. “Do you mind? I’m claustrophobic.”

Like hell.

Chapter Notes

Shorter chapter this time. Since I'm eager to reveal the upcoming part, I've decided to buckle down and post chapter XIV today also. Expect it in the coming hours. As always, thank you for your interest and patience with TWCH.

Mild tension kept Imayoshi preoccupied as he waited for Aomine to arrive. A mere eight hours remained before the invasion would begin, as he had no intention of submitting. His broadcast acquired more response than he anticipated and he was proud that the people hadn’t lost faith in him. Nearly all the available men over the age of twenty-four had been conscripted into the hunter’s guild and combat squad conglomerate and were outfitted. Aomine worked quickly, despite the infirmity that incapacitated him for a few hours yesterday afternoon, as detailed by Nebuya Eikichi. The men’s efforts had set up a defensive perimeter both north and south and were in the midst of debriefing when Imayoshi sent his messenger to call Aomine to his office.

The diligent patriotism would be rewarded with an even greater task. One that would suit the Ice in the upcoming hours. He needed to ensure his successes went off without a hitch. Everything needed to be timely. Mistakes now deserved nothing short of unmerciful punishment.

A gentle tap to the doors diverted his apprehension and he admitted the man inside.

Aomine motioned to remove his boots but he forgave the breech in manners and insisted the matter was more important than etiquette. With classic indifference, the man entered and sat opposite him at the tea-table.

“Something wrong?”

For a moment he wondered if perhaps he wore an unpleasant look. “I’m reassigning you.”

Betrayal held Aomine’s face. “Look if this is about—”

“Quiet.” Delivered like a whip, his nephew stiffened to attention. “I have an even greater assignment for you. One far more critical than leading the battle.”

“I’m listening.” The impatience was grating, as always, but understanding that the man had been
suffering an emotional crisis allowed him to overlook it.

“We need to turn this war to our advantage before it starts. We cannot survive an attack on two fronts. Which is why you’re going to bench one of them.” Aomine cocked a brow and he liked that he maintained the edge of suspense. “You’re to assassinate Kaizer Hyuuga Junpei.”

A tardy reply came.

“Think back to the Wolf Pack Pact of 1990. Between the three of us—the Lord, Kaizer, and myself—we are not allowed to attack each other without provoking retaliation. Say, if I attack Hyuuga, he’s benched from returning fire, and Akashi acts in his place.” Aomine nodded. “That is something we need to act on right now. Eliminating the Lightning allows us to deal with only one offender and I prefer the Fire.”

“It’s a natural disadvantage.”

If it were any other moment, Imayoshi might be proud that his nephew had been paying attention all those years ago in the Academy. “Yes, but the Lightning is a far more aggressive threat. The weather plays into their advantage and with the recent climate change, I cannot afford that. Remember, they hail during the rainy season.” A thoughtful look crossed Aomine’s face too quickly for him to question it, so he continued. “Winter’s coming soon, which will allow us the upper hand. But Aomine, Hyuuga must die first.”

“I don’t know.” Another prolonged response.

“Do you doubt yourself?”

“Of course not.” The strength of the declaration quickly deflated. “It’s just… What makes you think I’m capable? I’m not even… potent enough to handle something like this.”

He hadn’t expected this and it disappointed him. Since when had Aomine refused him? Where was the confidence, the ego, the energy? If this was the work of Kagami Taiga, then he could be considered impressed. Nothing had ever rankled Aomine enough to send him in a downward spiral of listless self-deprecation. Frankly the sight was disgusting.

So he decided to do something about it.

He reached across the table and lifted the man’s chin. “Aomine, you are of the Ice. Always have been, always will be. You are more than capable of carrying out your duties without additional support.” The flash of content pleased him and he went on to say, on a more serious and convincing note, “Your nation needs you to do this. And I know you won’t let me down.”

A faint smile crooked Aomine’s mouth and he relaxed as emotional control lifted the overwhelming veil of glum. Assurance was sealed with a slow breath and his nephew sat up straight.

“What’s the plan?”

---

Kagami plunged through the corridors of the palace with aggravated resolution. The invasion was
due to start in eight hours and he was suddenly needed in Akashi’s office? This close to wartime meant nothing good would come from the summons. And he’d had it with his brother’s micromanaging. Nothing had been applicable for him without first consulting Akashi. Not his tutoring, not his emancipation, not even his own hobbies. And now his brother was asking for an audience, on the precipice of war, when the last words shared between them had been less than friendly?

He was going to be removed from his station.

Anger lengthened his gait and he was soon upon the doublewide doors.

Without dignity, he violently threw them open.

“You slack the leash and then yank it back when I take advantage of the privilege. It is your personal fucking mission to piss me off?”

Akashi leveled a plain stare and he closed the distance to the desk. He leaned into his brother’s space and stared into those fiery eyes.

“Is it yours? Those doors just destroyed father’s portrait and what was once your mother’s vase.”

If Akashi was looking to distract him, it wouldn’t work. Not when Kagami was all bite and no bark. He gripped the lip of the desk and tried again, “What could I have possibly done to you this time? I already told you, I’m not sitting this out.”

“And I don’t expect you to.” Uncharacteristic annoyance weighed the tone and Akashi pushed a finger into his chest. “Do you mind? I’m claustrophobic.”

Like hell. But he receded fractionally. “Then what the hell do you want?”

“I’m reassigning you.”

Heat swelled within and a wild blaze fringed his exposed skin. “You little son of a bitch, I just said —”

“The Kaizer is in jeopardy.”

The words hit home and the flames evaporated. Akashi took advantage of his shock to explain.

“Imayoshi knew about you attacking Aomine somehow. And you know why that is a problem.” He mechanically nodded. “Well he tried passing that off as a viable excuse to compel Hyuuga and I into a confrontation. Because of you.”

“That’s ridiculous. Aomine is a Neutral, he doesn’t have a nationality.”

A strange look passed across his brother’s face but Akashi continued before he could question it.

“Regardless of Aomine’s origins, Imayoshi is preparing for battle. Hyuuga is at risk for foul play and I need you at the fort immediately to protect him.”

Something was off. The alarm and apprehension he was feeling was disconcerting. If Imayoshi succeeded in killing the Kaizer, it would plunge the Apparition world into immeasurable turmoil and discord. More than just eliminating a threat, the Dan would risk uncensored aggression from not just the Lightning, but their allies. The Fire and Shadow. What else could Hyuuga’s murder serve?
Urgency chased the thought away and he hurried to the door. “On my way.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

His gaze darted between the attacker and Hyuuga. He stiffened when the stranger turned to him. Short dark hair topped a head with a blunt nose and muted eyes. A tight leather uniform hugged a lofty body. The menacing aura suppressed his movement and all he could do was speak.

“What did you do?”

“Simply tip the tide in your favor.” And the man retracted into the darkness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Approaching the fortification proved easier than Aomine had thought. Weaving through the Russian wilderness snuggling the outpost, he abandoned his horse and crept to the edge of the forest. Petulant thunderclouds loomed across the noontime sky and a fleeting energy kept him alerted to nearby movement as he neared the southwest wall of the structure. Many like it remained along the Sino-Russian borderline, built centuries ago when the Ice had been more hostile after the Fire’s aggression successfully caged them into a more confined space. Built from nearby stones, it resembled a towering trapezoid, wide at the bottom and narrow on top, with carved windows protected by steel shutters. Completely impenetrable from outside attack and provided with a supple view of the valley below.

Patrol units were stationed at tight intervals and he surveyed their pattern to determine the most effective entry point. Sneaking through the thicket, he found an attractive bullseye window whose shutter remained ajar. He waited for the appointed security to drift out of earshot before he trotted to the portal and climbed through.

Darkness cloaked the hallway and he recalled his destination was on the top floor. He skulked through the silent stretch following a carpet runner to the mouth of the stairwell seventy-five feet away. Strangely enough, he hadn’t heard voices and wondered if the men had been dismissed from the premises. If so, he couldn’t fathom why. But he didn’t over think it and climbed the steps two at a time.

No movement reached him from the second floor either and he continued up to the fourth floor. The lack of attendants was starting to bother him. To soothe his restlessness, he hunkered behind a stack of crates and listened. Moments passed before he assured himself that the fort must have been emptied, the men readying for battle. He rose and skated the network of corridors, drawing ever closer to the Kaizer’s chamber. He turned left and spotted the doublewide doors.
Kagami walked the carpet runners of the fort, arriving in record time. He regretted pressuring his elk so hard and reminded himself to treat the creature to an extra serving of grain later. The head of the guard told him upon arrival that most of the officers in the fort had been dismissed to prepare for the signal to strike. In less than four hours, the Apparition world would pay witness to yet another international conflict. He lamented forfeiting his position but assured himself that securing the Kaizer was much more important.

The occasional attendant passed between rooms as he ascended to the fourth level. Threading the linear passageway knotted a thick ball of tension in his stomach. He hadn’t been daft enough to ignore the enormous responsibility this detail required. With its success, he would prove once and for all to his brother that he was completely competent outside of the man’s omnipresent watch.

---

One of the doors was cracked and Aomine heard faint voices.

His heart panged but he edged closer to intercept the discourse.

“You really think this will solve everything?” Kaizer Hyuuga said in English.

Aomine gripped his knife and scooted further. The voice was strained as if the man had been afflicted. From what, he could only hazard to guess. Despite the language barrier, he committed his ears to hear all.

“You leaked classified information.” A new voice, tight and nasally. “And once you’re gone, we’ll find the leak that informed you. Then the truth will die with both of you.”

“So that’s what this is really about?” The words were squeezed through gritted teeth. “More than this bullshit war?”

“This is how it must be.” A pause. Then a muttered German phrase.

The guttural scream of the Kaizer charged Aomine’s body. He rammed the doors open and froze. Hyuuga’s body, suspended inches above a scarlet stain blossoming on the rug, was impaled with a thick black skewer through the chest. Vines slithered from the neck and arms and the man’s body crumpled in a boneless heap. A figure loomed over the Kaizer’s form and the familiar shadows shrunk out of sight. The owner of the second voice he’d identified.

His gaze darted between the attacker and Hyuuga. He stiffened when the stranger turned to him. Short dark hair topped a head with a blunt nose and muted eyes. A tight leather uniform hugged a lofty body. The menacing aura suppressed his movement and all he could do was speak.

“What did you do?”

“Simply tip the tide in your favor.” And the man retracted into the darkness.

---
A distant scream resonated along the walls and Kagami recoiled. Heart hammering, he unsheathed the kodachi and sucked a breath. Gearing his legs forward, he hustled around two corners. As he approached the threshold of the approaching hallway he slowed and listened.

He stepped onto the runner and spotted the awkwardly cracked doors of the Kaizer’s chamber. A figure crossed the room. Forgetting caution, he advanced.

—

A surge of panic swept over Aomine and he rushed to the body, hopeful to see the faint flicker of life. Dropping the knife, he grabbed the man’s shoulders and jostled feverishly. His pretty words were met with ghostly silence and the pained yellow-green eyes that stared lifelessly back at him speared him deep. He raked shaky hands through his hair and searched for the knife. He couldn’t look away.

He couldn’t even close those scornful eyes that condemned him. He rolled to his feet and for the first time in his life, he was petrified. Not even responsible for the man’s murder and suddenly he felt like the wrongly accused being paraded before the firing squad. Lungs fervently spent air and he whipped to the door.

Kagami Taiga stopped his retreat.

—

Kagami locked eyes with Aomine. Whatever emotion those obscure depths were trying to communicate were deflected as he looked past the Neutral to the body lying disgracefully over a patch of blood. He didn’t need to get close to know who it was. The striking blonde hair and rimless glasses were unmistakable.

“Kagami, no.” Aomine’s voice wobbled. “I didn’t do this. Just listen to me for a minute.”

“So this is what you are, huh?”

Flames licked his arms and fingers. Defensive hands came up as he stepped forward.

“Kagami, stop. Believe me, this wasn’t me.”

“Your blade, Aomine,” he yelled.

Betrayal fueled the heat to consume his shoulders and neck, his limbs bathed in fire. Aomine lobbed the weapon aside and retreated another step. The distress in the man’s eyes translated more to his benefit.

“I never should have trusted you.”

He lunged and sent a stream of flames. The shot missed as the man scrambled back, toppling over the Kaizer’s body. Another missile was fired and the Neutral rolled to evade it. He closed in while
Aomine recovered and tackled the man to the carpet. The use of inertia allowed Aomine to propel him off. As he rose, he found his quarry hustling through the portal and he hurried to maintain pursuit.

Suddenly the absence of people within the fort was appreciated. He couldn’t afford to be disrupted. They charged down the runners. Aomine hooked corners with impressive ease and managed to gain necessary distance. But the straightaway expanses allowed him to close the gap until the next turn. He needed to corner Aomine and quickly. Which would be a problem. Neither was familiar with the fort’s layout and the chances of getting lost were great. Whether that would play to Kagami’s advantage was unclear.

Several times Aomine called back to him. Telling him to stop. To listen to him. To trust him. And he ignored it all. He conserved his energy for the critical task ahead.

Catching and killing Aomine Daiki.

—

Aomine’s thighs ached as he raced the passageways back the way he’d came. Stupid of him to retrace his steps, he knew. But his heart ran wild with fear and his legs simply carried him along. He found the flight of stairs and threw himself down onto the landing. The impact jarred his knees but he swiftly descended to the third floor. Kagami copied the movement and kept chase.

“Kagami, just listen to me. Please.”

His voice was hoarse with frustration as all his pleas were repelled without consideration. His agility worked to his favor when turning corners but Kagami’s capacity to sprint surprised him. Aomine was running out of both options and energy. He had to lose the prince somehow and find his way out without arousing the patrol. He cut left.

A few bounds down the passageway and a punch of heat contacted his calf. He stumbled as pain shuddered up his leg. Kagami’s footfalls grew louder and he raked his mind for a solution. Impulse guided his muscles as the prince’s body came close.

He turned to face Kagami.

—

Primal energy fueled Kagami as he spent a narrow shot, hoping to make contact and impede his quarry’s escape. It succeeded and he closed the distance. He readied his arm and cocked it back.

He let fly a punch as Aomine turned.

The man parried his arm and a hand glided over his face. Pushing down as one of his legs was swept out, Aomine hammered a blow to his chest. The fluid motion sent him crashing to the ground.
The air left him and he cursed his ineffective memory. How could he forget that the Neutral employed random movements in combat? The footsteps of his quarry were quickly fading and he heaved himself from the floor with effort.

Struggling to reclaim his breath, he maintained pursuit.

Aomine backtracked and descended the stairs to the second level. Kagami would be on his heels again soon and whatever ground he could put between them was valuable. He followed familiar passageways. Distant thumping of feet could be heard and the sustained distance eased his trepidation.

He turned left and collided hard with someone. He reeled at the impact and braced himself on the wall. A smaller man massaged an assaulted face and recovered spilled paperwork. The spewed apologies triggered his memory and he was soon looking into the timid eyes of Sakurai Ryou.

Words failed to come to him.

“Aomine-san, what’re you doing here?” Eyes fell from his face to his clothes and grew wide. “You’re covered in blood.”

He took a moment to confirm the revelation. Hyuuga’s blood splotched his pants and shirt. It was then that a thought occurred to him. There he stood, within the Lightning territory—an enemy in a guarded fort—and the little man was more concerned the he had blood on his clothes. Where was the retaliation?

He found the man’s softened gaze and stepped back cautiously.

“Aomine,” Kagami shouted fifty feet away.

His muscles came alive with the heat of the chase and he took off again.

Sheer determination propelled him onward as his lungs strained to consume enough air. As he neared the Kaizer’s secretary, the little man barred his advance. He didn’t regret nearly knocking the man to the floor. That Sakurai managed to withstand his force alone was astounding. He wove around the secretary and ignored the protests.

“Aomine murdered Hyuuga,” he called back. “Contact Akashi.”

The unfamiliar wilderness made negotiating surfaced veins of tree roots and thick vines of forest overgrowth difficult. Dispersed boulders and rubble taxed his aching calves unmercifully. Aomine was experiencing similar difficulties as Kagami resorted to using projectiles to cut off sudden
avenues of escape. The blow he landed to the Neutral’s leg was hampering stamina and all Kagami had to do was outlast Aomine. The man hazarded a look back and lost footing. Failing to notice the sudden drop in elevation, Aomine collapsed to the leafy bed of the forest floor.

He wouldn’t fail to intercept again.

Spurring himself on, he dashed and dove for the man.

—

Aomine cried painfully as he and Kagami crashed to the ground. Strong thighs pinched his waist as the prince pinned him down. He shot his arms out to deflect a cocking arm but he reacted too slowly. Knuckles pounded his jaw once, then twice.

“You miserable son of a bitch,” Kagami yelled.

A fist cuffed his burn and he screamed, withdrawing for distance. The same hand clutched his throat and his own zoomed to remove it. Kagami’s fingers dug in and he fought for words.

“Fuck, Kagami. Stop.”

The *kodachi* was brought into view, its sharpened edge brought close. Terror froze him and pain fired in all directions within. The eyes that glared back at him held no remorse and he squeezed Kagami’s wrist in vain to cease. He barely recognized the faint drops of rain now kissing his face as he watched the blade adjust above his heart.

He mustered what little energy he had left to dislodging Kagami. His nails pierced slick flesh and panic consumed him. A loud roar filled his ears and his vision went white, bleaching out the image of Kagami driving his armed hand down.

—

Kagami barely registered the growling thunder overhead. Grip tight on the hilt, he drove down. Then a flash of bluish-white. A wave of pain paralyzed him.

It lasted only a moment.

Then he folded over and his world faded out.

Chapter End Notes

In case you wanted a visual of what Aomine did to Kagami: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYP_O0WtAjc (fast forward to 5:24)
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

“You know who I am and you know I hilariously outrank you.”

“You know who I am and you know I hilariously outrank you.”

Yet I answer to someone who, as you say, hilariously outranks you.”

If the shadow was trying to be funny, Kagami wasn't laughing. “And what the hell does that mean?”

“Lord Akashi has decreed that you’re to remain within the physical premises of the fort until otherwise directed. And that if you’re to resist, I’m authorized to use the necessary force to detain you.”

“You don’t scare me.”

Chapter Notes

As always, thank you for the love. And the comments are so endearing and make my day at work. I'd be lying if I said adding to the story wasn't a little nerve-wracking. But that you've been sticking with me this long says I must be doing something right. I hope you enjoy this installment. m(_ _)m

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Morning hit Kuroko with a sudden burst. No sound had penetrated the barracks where he’d waited for Aomine’s return the night before, as ordered by the Dan. Strange, he thought, that he was irrevocably sentenced to remain at his partner’s side yet was detained indefinitely for an undisclosed reason. Yesterday afternoon a messenger necessitated Aomine’s presence with Imayoshi and as Kuroko followed, the woman stopped and redirected him to wait in the barracks. When he questioned the change in assignment, the woman simply reiterated her message and escorted him to the guild. Nothing about the summons felt innocent and he cursed his intrinsic loyalty that he remained. Some time into the night he’d lost to fatigue and fell asleep.

Now he regretted his compliance.

He skated the expanse of the temple promenades with haste. Abruptly woken by the hustling of hunters through the quarters, he’d realized his mistake. Aomine was nowhere within the guild. The many attendants and nurses he’d passed on his way out hadn’t seen the man either. It was rare for his partner to rise any earlier than nine AM. And that was without his interference.

The voices of the people as he crossed one strip of polished wood after another accelerated his fear that something dreadful may have befallen Aomine. Entering the pavilion only worsened the feeling. Cries, both joyous and condemning, told him that the Fire had begun the attack little after midnight. The prospect of war hadn’t surprised him. He knew Imayoshi wouldn’t bow down before Akashi Seijuurou and Hyuuga Junpei. That same arrogance was what dismantled the Ice’s
military sixteen years ago. Aomine’s timely disappearance, however, was alarming and he was appalled that none of the temple folk seemed to pay it any mind.

He tuned out the chittering ambiance and entered the catwalk of the third temple. And prayed to see that long dark body splayed over the sheets in undignified comfort.

A groan of thunder drew his eyes to the murky clouds frozen over the temple. A series of birds flocked through the cool air, skirting sudden breezes in retreat of the oncoming deluge. The scent of wet rock wafted through the open expanse, disturbing the already restless committee pacing the pavilion behind him. A purple flicker through the dreary gray caught his attention and a loud pitch of thunder slammed the air. Kuroko flinched.

A thick stream of whitish-purple lightning screwed down and punched the third temple roof. Distant splintering of wood and frantic screams followed the assault and spurred him on. Racing to the doors, he visualized the layout of the temple and a sickening feeling cinched his gut.

Aomine’s room was in the stricken quadrant.

He slithered through the retreating throng, grateful to his incorporeal presence as he negotiated packed hallways. The acrid stench of roasting wood reached him as he cleared the mass and searched the afflicted hall. The bolt had torn through two levels and another growl of thunder threatened a second strike that Kuroko hoped would not come. Stepping around and over collapsed beams and fragments of the infrastructure he risked calling for Aomine. By some miracle the heat produced little fire to be concerned about and he proceeded without hesitation.

No reply.

Another raucous peal from the sky followed him as he turned a mutilated corner exposed to the valley forest and a strong gust of wind rattled loosened floor panels. He sucked a steeling breath and leapt across the injured area and jogged to the next corner.

He heard the deep guttural barking of Nigou and turned. Beams from both assaulted tiers of the temple had ripped through the walls and dispersed debris along the passageway. Chunks obstructed his view further down but he spotted the malamute’s head bobbing as it leapt and howled. Kuroko wound through the clutter and felt a draft spilling from Aomine’s chamber through cracks in the wall. Nigou spun viciously and jumped at the door. He did nothing to calm the animal and tested the portal himself. It didn’t give. Considerate of the damage, he appraised the condition and found it. One of the collapsed beams collided with the frame and crippled the doors, cracking one nearly all the way through at the top. He dared a peek through the gap but a silhouette of ruin was all he could identify. Taking a cautionary step back, signaling the dog to desist, he reared his leg back and connected with the wood. The structure moaned obstinately and the door splintered an inch. Swallowing a few breaths, he put more distance between himself and the portal and charged. When his foot connected this time, the scar widened and the blockade buckled under the pressure. He shielded his face from the exhaust of dust and crawled over the toppled wall.

He called for Aomine again. Nigou bounded across the rubble and hurried into the chamber. The dog yipped and barked as it neared what was once Aomine’s bed, its frame shattered and mattress laden with timber and roof tiles. He followed and pushed the malamute away as he cleared planks of frayed wood.

Aomine lay beneath sputtering for a clear breath. Pain exuded from his tense figure and coils of electricity thinned into nothing.

He scooped up the man’s head and shook. “Aomine-kun, what happened?”
Dust collecting over a head wound dyed red and Kuroko freed the hem of his shirt and blotted the area. Nigou mouthed concern from the edge of the wreckage and paced with a similar apprehension coursing through him as he anxiously waited for a response.

His partner’s chest lurched with a sharp inhale and dark eyes shot open. One powerful hand grasped his arm and he slid to connect their hands.

“Aomine-kun, what happened?”

Stunned eyes found him. Then squeezed shut with a spell of tormented groaning.

“Kagami…” The admission was hushed and lamenting.

A look of pure hurt flashed his partner’s tightened features. Pressure loosened around his hand and breathing slowed to a resting minimum. Kuroko schooled his emotions. Nothing from his partner’s appearance persuaded him to believe death was near. Though cursory upon approach, no blood spotted the floors and no gashes through the clothes indicated attack with intent to kill. Yet Aomine voiced the prince’s name. As the man fell into repose, he inspected for burns. None. No singed fabric or melted skin.

What the hell happened?

—

Kagami’s body vibrated with a muscle-stretching ache. From head to toe, the sensation was uncomfortable and he turned on the adequate cushion where he lay to find comfort. The agitation persisted and he groaned. The sickly sweet smell of disinfectant invaded his nostrils and he cracked his eyes open. Bleary whiteness and a blob of color washed into his vision. Slowly he calculated his bearings and shot upright.

He squished his palms into his eyes as a timid voice beside him spoke and he whipped around.

Sakurai Ryou was planted in a chair, a notepad and several folders stacked on his lap.

The little man continued to speak but he tuned it out, taking in his surroundings. Bleach-white walls lined the long room and three cots filed in succession beside his, all empty. A cart of supplies was parked beside a medicine cabinet through which he could see many glass bottles of questionable substance. Identical pairs of dressers were set on either side of the doorway. Bearing with the body-wide ache, he leaned and peered out the window positioned between his and the neighboring cot. Thunderclouds congealed over the forested stretch of valley and he followed the stream cutting through the verdant sea to distant plumes of black smoke reaching skyward.

Movement drew his eyes lower where he identified the very same head of the guard who had admitted him to see Hyuuga.

He was back in the fort.

Where was Aomine?

He wrenched the covers off and threw himself off the cot. “Where is he?”

The volume shook the secretary but the man stood regardless. “Where’s who?”
If Sakurai was looking to mind play games, he wasn’t interested. “Aomine Daiki.”

“We don’t know where he is. When we found you, he was already gone.”

Found him? What the hell was this?

The secretary intercepted his confusion and gingerly laid a hand over his arm. But he was in no mood and shrugged away the gesture.

“What do you mean ‘already gone?’”

Sakurai’s brows knit and large eyes narrowed. “Kagami-san, do you not remember what happened?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? Aomine snuck in here and killed Hyuuga. I caught him, gave chase outside, and captured him. Where the hell is he?”

“I told you, he was already gone.” The man’s apologetic tone was getting annoying. “I remember Aomine-san coming here and I sent a search party to follow after I sent word to Akashi-san, as you had asked. But Kagami-san, you were all alone out there.”

Frustration was setting in and he needed to calm down if he had any hope of recovering the missing fragments of his memory. He rounded the aluminum frame of the cot and sunk onto the cushion beside the chair. Scrubbing his hands through his hair, he tipped his gaze to the secretary.

“I chased Aomine out into the woods. I intercepted him. Yet he’s suddenly gone.”

“Yes. You were lying on your stomach when we found you and you were unresponsive.”

Did that motherfucker knock him unconscious?

He contained the rising anger and asked that Sakurai inform him of the developments since his encounter with Aomine.

“Kaizer Hyuuga’s body was recovered and should be arriving at Casimir Palace in a few hours for processing. The people are furious but cannot retaliate. The Pact forbids them, so they wait behind the fence. They cry for Akashi-san to dismember the temple and expel Imayoshi-san. As of now, the Fire has maintained their advance since little after midnight but according to the last report I received, their forces have only managed to subdue a mere seventeen percent of the southern villages.”

Kagami snorted. This was perfect. The entire plan, orchestrated with careful contrivance, had fallen apart practically overnight and not only could he not get to the fort fast enough to make a difference, but he couldn’t even recall how he miraculously wound up in the infirmary without having succeeded in either of his endeavors. He couldn’t possibly face his brother now.

To hell with composure.

He rose from the bedding and marched to the dresser. He heedlessly purged the contents, tossing aside anything unfamiliar. Sakurai approached as he rooted and he ignored the polite attempts at interruption. The secretary advised him to stop and that he wasn’t allowed to leave. Impatience and aggravation made for a potent cocktail to his already elevated tone. He parried the little man’s desisting swipes that tried to distract him from redressing. The hospital gown was removed and chucked and the secretary used the moment to seize his shirt.
“Give it back.”

“I told you, you cannot leave.”

He admired the little ground hog’s bravery. But he’d force the interloper to face his own shadow, return his shirt, and discharge him. A long stride cast his towering figure across the smaller man and he reached for the garment. Sakurai’s evasion and quick transfer was unprecedented and Kagami cursed his hampered reflexes. His frustration was reaching climactic levels as he argued with the secretary to relinquish the shirt and back down.

A new nasally voice interrupted. “What’s with all the commotion?”

Kagami turned to the speaker. He recognized the man instantly. Susa Yoshinori, the head security chief of the Czar, Kaizer, and Akashi. The man was about his size and stature with dark hair and eyes, creamy brown skin, and a serious face. Few times in the past had they crossed paths. And fewer times had they actually spoken. The man’s clandestine nature had always left a questionable impression that led Kagami to suspect the interloper was up to no good. There was something to be said for instincts and when in the presence of this man, he heeded them. Yet Susa had also proved to be extremely competent and acutely aware of Apparition hierarchy.

And Kagami planned to abuse it.

“Good, someone reasonable,” he said. “Get rid of this little brat and discharge me. I need to get to the castle.”

He chanced an opportunity to snatch the shirt but Sakurai tucked it out of reach.

“No can do, prince.”

He leveled a challenging stare on those unreadable eyes. Familiar, yet foreign. Silently, he wondered if this was a learned skill or an inherent trait of the Shadow. “And why not?” He hoped leveraging rank would release him from the fort. “You know who I am and you know I hilariously outrank you.”

No emotion betrayed the man’s face. “Yet I answer to someone who, as you say, hilariously outranks you.”

If the shadow was trying to be funny, Kagami wasn’t laughing. The jab only strengthened his temper and he stepped close. “And what the hell does that mean?”

Susa smirked and stood aplomb. “Lord Akashi has decreed that you’re to remain within the physical premises of the fort until otherwise directed. And that if you’re to resist, I’m authorized to use the necessary force to detain you.”

“You don’t scare me.”

A sinister glint flashed across black orbs and animated limbs rose from Susa’s shadow. Kagami stepped back and growled. The same trick that little runt Kuroko used against him in the holding cells. The wispy black lengths floated as if on a wind current around the man’s legs.

“No, but these might. So, for your own protection, I advise you make yourself comfortable.”

He refused to admit defeat, so he scoffed and said, “Just get out, spook.”

The vines sucked into the security chief’s shadow and the man left with a grin that Kagami wanted
to slap off.

Tension soothed as he ventilated his anger through deep breaths. Puffs of weak flame disguised each exhale until he felt he was rational enough to comply without inviting whatever punishment Susa could fabricate with those disgusting tendrils. Assuredly calm, he turned to the secretary, who had returned to the chair, and palmed his neck.

“Sorry about the intimidating,” he fought through the embarrassment of apology, “and y’know, raising my voice and all.”

Sakurai shook his head and forgave him quickly. Experience reminded him that insisting responsibility would unleash an apologetic blue streak. And he didn’t want that. So he stomached the reprieve and reached for the gown. Not that he needed the garb but it would do well to thwart the conditioned chill teasing his exposed skin. He wasn’t sure who disrobed him but he was thankful they left his underwear intact. The shame of revealing all to the secretary would have been insurmountable.

“Wait.” He looked to the secretary and the shirt fisted in man’s cocked arm. “I guess being comfortable doesn’t break the rules.”

“You never know with Akashi.”

Sakurai returned a sheepish look and he caught the airborne shirt. “Your pants are in the bottom drawer, along with your socks and boots.”

Kagami jumped into the familiar coziness of his cargos and hobbled one foot after another to slip into his socks. He neglected the admonishment to sit down from Sakurai and the subsequent suppressed snickering as he repeated the pitiful balancing act to lace his boots. While stooping, he noticed the marred skin of his back. He bolted upright and twisted to reveal the sight in the mirror beside the dresser. Fright overtook him.

“What the fuck is this?”

The exclamation startled Sakurai and the papers spilled to the floor. “That’s a Lichtenberg figure,” the man stammered out.

Kagami adjusted the mirror to better capture the image. From the top of his shoulders a tree of electricity coiled down the expanse of his back, off-center from his spine. Tendrils splintered and the length of the mark ended just below the waist of his pants. Dyed red and tender to the touch, the mark mapped his entire back.

“And you didn’t say anything earlier?” He probably allowed too much volume, judging from how Sakurai recoiled. “What the hell is a Lichtenberg figure, Sakurai?” He didn’t bother with respectful address since the secretary overlooked telling him about the horrendous scar.

“It happens when someone or something is struck by lightning. It doesn’t appear in all cases, though, and occurrences on the back have been known to happen.”

The words sank in and Kagami gripped the mould of the mirror. Was that why his memory failed to come back? The weather the last few weeks had been poor, increasing the likelihood of thunderstorms with each passing day. Yet none had come. Apparently, not until yesterday.

“Guess that explains the soreness.”

“You should consider yourself blessed. Not many people survive a lightning strike.”
He allowed bitterness to grip his words. “I’ll let you know when your sentiment matters.”

He dropped his forehead to the mirror and sunk his eyes in reflection.

Damn his luck. Exceeding Akashi’s expectations was what he hoped to achieve from his venture this far north. Then he stumbled across Aomine over the Kaizer’s corpse and all hope of their continued association diminished. Betrayal and disappointment provoked him to pursue and he hadn’t expected himself to react as he had. Nor had he expected to encounter the Neutral this far from the temple. Whatever transpired after that is a blur.

Sakurai told him that the sentries who found him reported that he was alone. He’d been struck by lightning as well. Which, strangely, wasn’t what mattered.

Optimism fluttered in his stomach.

Aomine was still alive.

They weren’t done yet.

Chapter End Notes

Gomen for anything that may be confusing. I had to butcher this chapter up quite a bit over the last week to satisfy me. uAu
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

“Kagami-kun,” she said. “The same one who gave Dai-chan his burn?”

“I need to find him and come to an understanding of what happened. If possible, prevent him from coming after Aomine-kun again until the matter is settled.”

“Dai-chan can handle him.”

Aomine would have glowed at the declaration. But Kuroko was not.

Delivering Aomine to the infirmary was tiring. Many times Kuroko had been obligated to haul the man from one place to another within the temple, usually because an inebriated slur led to an unnecessary argument and Momoi hadn’t the ability to transfer one hundred and eighty pounds of man for long. Neither did he, he’d reminded himself, but he rolled the larger man onto his back and lumbered to the ward. His muscles didn’t appreciate the effort and were rebelling with exhaustion as he strode across the pentagonal deck.

He wasn’t certain where he was headed. But he remembered the one thing Aomine managed before relapsing into unconsciousness.

*Kagami…*

A foreboding feeling grabbed hold of him. Not knowing where his partner had been dispatched was concerning and the lack of communication only worsened it. To have finally found the man, only to hear a single word, uttered with dismay, told him nothing good had happened. But it also told him that Aomine and Kagami met again and the circumstances had been less than friendly. The nature of their competition, disguised by underlying physical attraction, had done little to arouse hostility from Kuroko. He had reasoned that if the two really wished to do harm, they would not invite such copious foreplay. Years ago, Kuroko would have more closely mitigated but he trusted Aomine’s judgment. The man had proven that Kagami was well within his range of capability.

But yet again he’d placed too much confidence in his partner.

And once again, the man was wounded.

He needed to find Kagami. And quickly.

A gathering on the deck attracted his attention. From the center, standing on a soap box, screeched a herald. Though normally the source of most temple gossip, as well as a social hindrance, heralds were also sources of by-the-hour developments. Conflicted, Kuroko neared the assembly and tuned his ears to the announcement.

“…and I’m told that as of this morning, the Lightning has been officially withdrawn from the war. Kaizer Hyuuga Junpei’s body was found and the one responsible for the murder, as reported by witnesses, was our very own Aomine Daiki.”

Kuroko’s eyes shot wide and his body tightened.
What did the man just say?

Aomine assassinated Hyuuga?

He entered the circle and eased closer. The revelation distracted the congregation to his advance and he found a supple gap between a priest and a mother with her child where he could intercept every word. The herald continued on, unabashed by the declarations.


Regretfully, not much else the man dictated merited his presence. It was evident that the temple had yet to be embroiled in the onslaught. He watched with predatory stillness as the herald orated. Around him he heard mixed reactions. Those in abundance irritated him. For one hundred years, the people of the temple shunned Aomine’s existence and involvement in politics as well as his improvement to the guild system. Hardly recognizing how much the man had actually provided for the temple, given his inadequacies. Only now that the man had achieved an attention-worthy feat was he being appreciated. And for all the wrong reasons. He despised their gullibility. Willing to believe rumor of Neutrality, infidelity, lechery, and now regicide. All by word-of-mouth. The voices who abhorred Aomine’s supposed actions did not settle well with him either. But he reined his composure and monitored the man as the speech wound down.

Locating Kagami may not have to wait long.

Since this man seemed to have insight into the incident, perhaps Kuroko could arrest the prince’s whereabouts.

Whether clemency would be issued, however, was another matter entirely.

He wove through the dispersing attendance, eyes trained on the retreating herald.

His quarry was nearing the catwalk of the first temple.

He shouldered a passerby and muttered apology.

A hand grasped his arm. “Tetsu-kun.”

He turned to find Momoi Satsuki. Consternation masked her face and a rock sunk into his stomach. To keep an eye on his prey, he maneuvered the woman in front of him. While he wanted to award her his undivided attention, he needed to accost that man before his lead disappeared.

“Momoi-san, don’t believe him.”

She let out an exasperated sigh and raked a hand through long hair. “Dai-chan wouldn’t do this. Why would that man lie?”

Over her head he spotted the herald making his way across the catwalk. “Something has happened,” he said, intending to propel the conversation.

“What,” she trailed off and followed his stare. “What are you going to do?”
He liked that no alarm claimed her voice. The respondent twinkle of her eyes told him she was
eager and he decided to welcome the extra hand. He gestured and they approached the walkway.
To cover lost ground, he lengthened his stride. Momoi likewise picked up her pace. When they
attained a distance of forty feet, they slowed and maintained the tail. Few people cluttered the
passage.

“You said something has already happened,” she said discreetly and threaded her arm around his.

Her ingenuity continued to surprise him. Following the man may take a while and the more
inconspicuous, the better chance of success. This wasn’t the time to indulge his romanticism, he
knew, yet few moments had ever awarded them this degree of unguarded closeness. And Momoi
deserved reciprocation from the many times he’d stunted her advances. He snaked down her thin
arm and found her hand. His eyes never left the herald as he threaded their fingers together.

“Have you heard what befell the third temple?” he asked.

She maintained expert control of her composure as she answered, “I heard it was struck by
lightning.”

“I went in to search for Aomine-kun.” The man veered from the temple doors and continued down
a posted walkway. Kuroko thought the choice of avenue questionable. Around all five temples
rimmed a posted deck. Perhaps the man’s business lay elsewhere. Momoi waited patiently for him
to continue once he ascertained the man wasn’t aware of their presence. “The bolt tore through the
first and second floor and Aomine-kun’s room was obliterated.”

She squeezed his hand and for a moment they locked eyes. The look he received asked that he
explain and he chose his words carefully.

“I suspect he met Kagami-kun again wherever the Dan sent him. Whatever the circumstances, it
was ugly.”

“Kagami-kun,” she said. “The same one who gave Dai-chan his burn?”

He didn’t like the edge in her voice, though he had felt similar animosity when Aomine had
breathed the prince’s name under the duress of pain.

“I need to find him and come to an understanding of what happened. If possible, prevent him from
coming after Aomine-kun again until the matter is settled.”

“Dai-chan can handle him.”

Aomine would have glowed at the declaration. But Kuroko was not.

“No,” he breathed and slowed as the herald eased into an empty portion of the walkway.
“Something’s wrong with Aomine-kun lately. Whatever that is played into effect when Kagami-
kun encountered him. That much I am certain of.”

Momoi seemed to understand his tacit meaning.

The herald stopped and fussed through the frock he wore. Perfect. The man’s guard was down. He
quickened his pace and she followed suit. “Our good friend the herald seems to be well-informed.”
Twenty feet and closing. “Let’s see if we can’t coerce tomorrow’s headline out of him a little
eyearly.”

“By your lead, sir.”
The dreary weather produced adequate resources to restrain the herald, the entire deck bathed in shadows. As he slipped his hand free of Momoi’s, the man whirled to his approach. A hand to the mouth quelled rebellion and he pushed the herald against the temple wall. From the thicker mass of darkness hugging the deck, a series of shadows striped across the man’s thrashing body and sealed him still. Wild eyes stared back at him and he sensed contempt. Contrary to expectations, obstinate prey was Kuroko’s most favored. Easy to predict and even easier to maneuver.

Momoi eased up beside him.

He kept his tone low as he addressed the herald. “That garbage you spewed was a lie.”

When he lifted his palm, the man wrenched back. “Don’t touch me, you disgusting creature. How dare you approach me like this. Who do you—”

Kuroko struck the herald’s jaw without remorse and wrapped his hand around an agape mouth. Drawing the man’s eyes to him, he declared his intent. “Who witnessed Aomine-kun killing Hyuuga-san?”

Grip sustaining, he allowed the man to speak around his palm. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

He squeezed hard and elicited an angry squeal. He felt Momoi step closer, their shoulders pressed firm. From a sidelong glance he identified a penetrating look. Beneath his hold the herald struggled for freedom. Tightening the fetters silenced the revolt. “So, you won’t tell me?”

“The fires of hell couldn’t compel me to tell you,” came a muffled response. He cringed at the accumulating moisture to his skin but remembered what Izuki had taught him all those years ago. *Weaknesses are the enemy’s playground.* Hygiene was to be the least of his worries.

He caught a distinct squint from Momoi. She was onto something, analyzing the herald’s remarks with her intuitive perception. Showing the enemy how badly you wanted something was the key to negotiation failures in the political sphere. Which was why he planned to force the herald’s hand.

“I already know who it was. I need to know where he is.”

Surprise flooded the man’s eyes, giving way to skepticism. “You’re bluffing.”

“I’m quite serious.”

“Name him,” the man said.

He dove right in. “Kagami Taiga.”

Muffled pride boomed from the herald’s concealed mouth. “Wrong. Kagami Taiga is stationed in the south.”

“He’s lying,” Momoi barked.

“Nice to see you’ve decided to open up,” he smiled halfheartedly to his captive. “So then, Kagami-kun must be in the north.” His temper abated as he realized this weak soul hadn’t the ability to disguise his intentions.

The herald shook his head furiously.

“The north it is,” she said.

The vehement refusal continued and the man thrashed against the restraints. Kuroko engaged
pressure and the movements ceased. Pain swelled through the herald’s red and sweat-slickened face. They were close. So he decided to press on and agitate the man into a readable response.

He disregarded the captive and looked to Momoi who stared as if looking through him. Which was the whole idea and he was pleased with their synchronous effort. “If he is in the north, he must be dispersed among the Kaizer’s troops. We’ll have to contact the War Administrator to verify.”

Her thin brows pinched slightly and he translated the message. *No. But almost.*

Hyuuga would have been in one of two places yesterday. Casimir Palace or the fort, embedded in the mountain range just beyond the Sino-Russian border. He decided to consult with Momoi and see if it would rattle a response.

“So you think we’ll be able to reach Hayakawa-san at Casimir Palace?” he asked her.

Trained rosy eyes resisted diversion as she shook her head. “Unlikely. Hayakawa-kun would remain close to the detachment.”

Which left one alternative.

So he said, “We’ll have to try the fort.”

A smile tugged the corner of her mouth and he followed her line of sight to see anxious eyes staring back at him. Again the man shook his head but it was too late. Alone, he may have had more difficulty ascertaining the prince’s location. Momoi’s assistance was invaluable. But for what he planned to do now that the herald had been so indirect, he wished she hadn’t tagged along.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” he said and finally lowered his hand. Wiping the offensive residue on his thigh, he turned to Momoi. “And you as well, Momoi-san.”

“You cheeky bastard,” the herald panted. “You think you can get away with harassing me like this? I’ll report you to the Dan. You’ll be—”

A strip of black wound up, securing the neck and head and effectively covered the querulous mouth. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her close. Hesitant hands slid up his back and reciprocated. Slipping into the silky tresses of her fine hair, he ducked his head and whispered, “Please don’t think badly of me.”

The shadows encasing the herald’s neck and head gripped and twisted. A thick pop was heard. Momoi flinched against him and he knew there was little he could do to console her. Thankful that she hadn’t tried to peer around him, he maneuvered the bound man to the railing of the walkway and dropped the corpse over the side. He loosened his hold and stepped back. No hint of disdain masked her face and the weight in his stomach lifted. Not that she looked delighted either. But to think that she would condemn him for doing what was necessary to protect Aomine would hurt beyond words. Yet there she stood, hand firm around his with confidence exuding from her eyes. Those calm rosy depths were alluring and he hadn’t noticed he was leaning in until their foreheads touched and he could see his reflection in her gentle stare.

“Off to the fort you go,” she breathed.

“Imayoshi is dangerous, Momoi-san. Whatever he’s planning involves Aomine-kun and I need to know what happened at the fort yesterday. Please, tread carefully around the Dan. He may have more resources than we previously thought.”

She nodded and squeezed his hand.
He needed to go, though his heart thought otherwise. Their hands slid apart stubbornly, more easily translating their unfulfilled desires than they ever had. The feeling of her tender grip resided as he hoisted himself onto the railing. A glance over his shoulder showed she intended to watch him off properly and he liked that.

Offering her an assuring smile, he scooted himself off the barrier and let gravity take him into the shadows blanketing the earth below.

—

The radio reported as Imayoshi predicted. Public reaction was likewise successfully engineered and he was satisfied with the turnout. Spun the right way, the people of the temple would believe most anything. A naïveté brought about by centuries of isolation and tepid peace. Though Aomine’s reputation augmented the morning announcement’s veracity. His nephew’s performance was the most anticipated piece of news and he couldn’t have been more proud. Of course only he knew the truth of Hyuuga’s murder. He thought back to his conference with Susa the day of.

“Aomine Daiki.”

Susa’s skepticism was expected. “Don’t force me to start doubting your competence, Imayoshi.”

“You’ve the wrong idea. He’ll only serve as a martyr, the irritant to finally launch this war in our favor.” The subtle cock of the shadow’s brow told him to continue. “Aomine is bound by a doctrine that dissuades him from harming those who’ve yet to harm him. He won’t actually kill Hyuuga. That’s why I’m enlisting you.”

“Odd, I must have lost my invitation in the mail.”

“Don’t be cross.”

“If I understand you correctly, I’m meant to kill Hyuuga and Aomine’s to take responsibility for it.” Imayoshi nodded and nursed his tea pensively. “Then I have a question for you.”

“Which would be?”

“What am I to do if he spots me?”

He chuckled and the shadow cast him an annoyed scowl. “For the last one hundred years, the temple has coasted on the preconception that Aomine is a Neutral being protected by his doting uncle under the pretense of a birth defect. The man makes a living off of killing. No one would think twice to scrutinize that he may actually be telling the truth if he attempts to shift blame onto you, a nameless Shadow assassin.” Susa seemed to be following along, so he pressed on. “Imagine the reactions the day after. He’ll be so pressured by praise, finally accepted as more than an anathema that the last thing he would consider is to question me. All the man’s ever wanted was to be accepted as a part of the temple and now he will be. Only after you’ve acted and slain Hyuuga.”

The shadow smirked and swiftly drained his drink. He tabled the cup and cut a look to Imayoshi that pleased him. “Can do, boss.”
“You’re due for patrol at the fort tomorrow. I plan to send Aomine to coincide with battle preparations, within the waning hours. Clear the building, confirm his arrival, then accost Hyuuga.”

“Y’know, I’ve been looking for a reasonable excuse to end that wretched fool. Even if he hadn’t come into and passed that information along to Akashi, the man still would have had to die. Pity.”

The words were caustic but spoken true. He refilled both their cups and held his in celebration.
“To victory.”

Susa’s performance had gone off without a hitch, according to word on the street. Hyuuga was dead and on the way to Casimir Palace for entombment. Good riddance. Since his unprecedented election, unheard of for the monarchal government system, Hyuuga had maintained communication with the Fire, as the previous Kaizer had, and perpetuated the same animosity that kept the Ice from recovering their stolen land. The man’s temper alone grated his nerves. Loud and domineering, the Kaizer injected a new strain of violence and intolerance within his people that had begun diluting the obstinate indifference of the Ice. They had actually begun to fear their northern neighbors. They were becoming passive and fickle. But no more.

Hyuuga’s demise meant a life-altering course for the Lightning monarchy was in store. And Imayoshi intended to manipulate that as well.

He turned to the grandfather clock ticking methodically and noted the time. Little after ten AM. Susa’s itinerary would be finished in another few hours or so. Which gave him ample time to prepare. All that was left was to verify Aomine’s return to the temple and meet with Nebuya.

A soft knock pulled his attention to the opening door. Momoi Satsuki entered. The intrusion bothered him, as she had always been mindful of manners. She slipped out of her shoes and stood before the table. He sensed a mutinous energy through her eyes but her overall composure was lax. Interesting.

“May I help you?” he asked.

“I don’t like what you pulled at the summit.”

He wasn’t in the mood for a lecture but decided to indulge her nonsense. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Her stare hardened and her arms crossed. “You had no right to manipulate me into admitting Aomine-kun’s injury. He kept it from me for a reason and that you discovered it at all is suspicious. And how dare you use that to bargain against Lord Akashi.”

This was getting annoying, so he veered down a different avenue. “Where is Aomine?”

The derailment hadn’t the desired effect. “With all due respect, Dan, that’s none of your business.”

“Excuse me?”

She stooped and planted her hands on the tabletop. Though no threat invaded her face, her eyes spoke menacingly. “You’ve messed with him enough. You could have gotten him killed at the fort. There are more qualified people you could have used for this farce yet you insisted on tangling Aomine-kun in whatever you’re plotting against the Lord. Has he returned to the temple? Yes.”

Her brows tightened. “Will I tell you where he is? Absolutely not. When he’s ready, rest assured,
he’ll come to you.” She rose and stepped back. “As he always does.”

Contempt laced her words and he forced himself to contain his rising anger. How insolent.

She was overstepping her boundaries.

Time to remind her of her place.

“What I do to preserve national security is my decision. And who I enlist to guarantee that is as much my right. If you’d like, I can expatriate you now, incarcerate you as a hostile trespasser, and confine you to the holding cells until your attitude has been readjusted.” She tensed but had yet to allow the blatant rage to claim her face. “I will ask you one more time, Momoi-san. Where is Aomine?”

Tension weighed the air. Her eyes remained stapled on him, her posture firm and unyielding. Would she really risk imprisonment for her ex-husband? It was admirable, he could admit. Locating Aomine without her, though, would prove circuitous and he was impatient.

She exhaled a strained sigh and said, “He’s in the barracks.” And almost as if to spite him, she quickly added, with unguarded sarcasm, “Your majesty.”

He grunted. “Was that so difficult?”

Silence and a disgusted glare was his answer.

“Now, get out of my office.”
“To be fair, Kagami-kun, you assaulted me first.”

He reached back and connected a weak swat to Kuroko’s waist.

Then he thought, if Kuroko was going to bargain, so was he.

“Are you going to bring out those gross shadows?”

“No.”

He rolled his shoulders. “Then let me up.”

Thunder drummed in steady beats beyond the window pane and did little to distract Kagami.
Sakurai left him a while ago to give him some privacy and would return later with lunch. Since
then, he had lain on the cot, chin nestled deep into the stale pillow. The newly acquired scar was
too sensitive to pressure which inconvenienced him as he tended to sleep on his back. His turbulent
mind was assaulted with images of the incident from yesterday.

The distress striking Aomine’s face clawed at him, embossing in a vibrant imprint as he tried to
squash the memory behind tightly sealed eyes. It was a look he had witnessed before. Sheer terror
and helplessness. The man’s voice, characteristically languid and deep, was racked with
apprehension. As he pleaded to be heard, to be believed. To be trusted. Funny, Kagami thought,
how easily Aomine had persuaded him to be trusted with little effort.

The thrill of competition had opened the gateway to an unspoken partnership. One that neither had
wanted to sever too soon.

But Aomine curtly ended that when he invaded the fort with intent to assassinate Hyuuga.

He lifted himself from the cot and slid his gaze to the hovering mass of grey outside.

*Kagami, no. Just listen to me.*

He hung his head and massaged his brow as the memory took hold. How could Aomine have
expected him to listen quietly without rebellion?

*Believe me, this wasn’t me.*

Why should he? The implication alone was difficult to overcome in the short time before Kagami
abandoned rationality. Which wasn’t abnormal. He was known to have a volatile temper and, with
provocation, was quick to engage it. Yet with Aomine…

The man acted like prey, he retreated like prey, and he succumbed like prey. A sudden thought
occurred to him. Just before he decided to retaliate, he negated Aomine’s defense by addressing the
soiled knife. And the Neutral instantly discarded it. In the holding cells where Kagami had been
interrogated, Aomine displayed similar vulnerability. No attempt had been made to acquire another
weapon during the escape, either.

At the time, it had meant a man trying to divest his guilt.

But disarming himself meant Aomine had surrendered hostility.

Which he so foolishly misinterpreted as an insult.

He rose from the cot and began pacing. Implications and preconceptions aside, he wanted to believe the Neutral was innocent so they could maintain their contest. That the next time he saw Aomine the man wouldn’t be cagey or aggressive. That the snarky bastard would rib and needle him with a familiarity as if they had known each other for decades and incite another bout. The way Aomine got under his skin and consumed his thoughts was frustrating.

A scant part of him hoped the man was similarly vexed about him.

His emotions clashed and reflecting exhausted his patience.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he kicked the aluminum post of the cot. “God dammit. You stupid prick.”

“How rude, Kagami-kun.”

The voice from behind startled him and he reacted before he composed himself. Fire spit from his arm as he twisted to meet the threat. A blur of blue blipped into his peripheral vision. His ignited arm was parried and his wrist gripped tight. Curled behind his back, a boot unlocked his knee and he collapsed face down to the cot. A knee pressed hard to the center of his spine prevented his attempt to rebel. Pressure agitated the scar and he bit back a hiss. The residual weak flickers of his arm sputtered and died out.

“Please don’t struggle. I don’t want to hurt you.” A quiet tone as clear as glass. Kuroko Tetsuya.

He ignored the twitch of embarrassment and tested the shadow’s hold. Firm despite the man’s spare frame and fragile appearance.

“Nobody hears about this,” he said.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Though he perceived the shadow to be an honest man, he didn’t put much faith in the tone. “Get the hell off me.”

“Are you calm?”

“Look, unless you’re gonna massage the strain out of my shoulder, then get the hell off me.”

“To be fair, Kagami-kun, you assaulted me first.”

He reached back and connected a weak swat to Kuroko’s waist.

Then he thought, if Kuroko was going to bargain, so was he.

“Are you going to bring out those gross shadows?”

“No.”
He rolled his shoulders. “Then let me up.”

Kuroko hesitated but removed his knee and slid his hand off. Kagami rose and rotated the soreness away. He turned to the shadow and sensed no antagonism in the gentle features. In fact a look of urgency held fixed eyes.

“That was fun. We should do it again sometime.”

“I need your help, Kagami-kun.”

He couldn’t resist cocking a brow.

“It’s about Aomine-kun. I need to know what happened yesterday.”

—

Incredulity filled the eyes that stared back at Kuroko. Which he anticipated. Ingress to the fort was difficult in contrivance, yet simple in execution. The sentries had been so distracted and on edge that he managed to slip through a gap in their patrol route and entered a side door. His phantom presence, otherwise a curse, became a blessing today and he abused it to plunge the halls in search of Kagami. Mindful of the attendants milling about, he did well to skulk the runners, retreating to slivers of darkness or sucking himself into an available empty room to evade detection. All his movements carefully considered.

The chatter of two uniformed passersby noted his quarry and he lingered to ascertain a general location. Obtaining none, he continued on where he came upon the infirmary. He had hunkered down to observe the flash of movement and, through the crack in the door, identified the idiosyncratic features of the crown prince of the Fire.

Kagami was pacing, his face contorted with a mix of emotion.

He entered without caution, having no time to spare for secrecy. Many times he’d called the prince’s name and was ignored.

It wasn’t his fault the man didn’t hear him as much as it wasn’t his fault that the prince’s reaction necessitated constraint.

Regardless of the circumstances of their meeting, he needed Kagami’s help. The Dan could no longer be trusted.

He took a moment to collect himself. Since eliminating that bothersome herald his body had been wired with tension. A deep exhale soothed him enough, and he repeated, “I need to know what happened between you and Aomine-kun.”

The prince’s face hardened. “You really think you’re in a position to make demands?”

He wasn’t certain he deserved that. Of the many ways he had learned to disarm an offender, he’d utilized what was probably an elementary technique. Other than damaged pride, what else warranted the bitter approach?

“I know where I stand. What I don’t know is what happened between you two.”
Kagami offered him a scrutinizing look. “Have you been under a rock? He murdered the Kaizer.”

“No, he did not.” The words came quickly and he contained his anger. “You don’t know Aomine-kun. He would never hurt or kill someone who hadn’t accosted him first.”

“And you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

He frowned at the challenge. If Kagami was going to deflect, they would get nowhere fast. And Kuroko hadn’t the liberty to waste on stubbornness. There wasn’t much he could do to pressure the larger man into admitting the desired information without arresting him. And Kuroko was a man of his word.

“That aside, what went on between you two?”

“I caught him over the guy’s body.” Impatience swelled the prince’s tone and augmented his voice. “Knife in hand, blood on clothes. What the hell do you think I did?”

“That’s not an answer.”

The man scoffed. “I’m not stupid enough in implicate myself in front of the Dan’s lapdog. Just deal with the truth, Kuroko. Aomine killed Hyuuga, that’s all there is to it.”

The resignation alerted him.

If Kagami was reluctant to admit what transpired between he and Aomine, why perpetuate a truth even he was conflicted about? And try as he might, the prince wasn’t convincing Kuroko of his objectivity.

Still, the ardent declaration of murder had persisted. And Kuroko had heard it for the last time.

He needed Kagami to understand the gravity of the situation, so he decided to voice his suspicions.

“He did not murder the Kaizer. He was set up.”

Kagami’s eyes widened a fraction and then narrowed with cold appraisal. “Are you shitting me? That’s how you’re defending him?”

“I don’t joke. You’re the one obsessed with him to the point of possessing a dossier, so tell me how likely it is that Aomine-kun isn’t being set up.”

The implication froze the prince and the man sputtered for a response. When none seemed suitable, he fisted Kuroko’s collar and hoisted him nearly to eye level. “I am not obsessed with Aomine.”

“The dossier, Kagami-kun. You read it to learn how to screw with Aomine-kun. I shouldn’t have to tell you the one detail within it that you’re so annoyingly overlooking just to placate your guilt because something did occur between you two.”

He hadn’t realized his voice escalated until he drank in the man’s expression. A marriage of insult and scorn. And something more, hidden away beneath drawn brows. Regret.

“He speaks the truth,” a familiar voice wobbled from the doorway.

Kagami released him and they both turned.

Kuroko’s wired nerves were slaked, disabling his immediate thought to defend himself. Holding a
tin tray with a steaming bowl of soup and two wrapped sandwiches stood a petite brunet man. Wedged between his arm and ribs were a collection of folders and a thick book. An anxious look that the man was known for was substituted for remorse. Sakurai Ryou greeted Kuroko with a tip of his head and closed the door behind him as he entered.

The lack of alarm was surprising. After all, Kuroko, though unseen to many, was known as an assassin of the Shadow to the upper echelons of the Apparition world. Sakurai included.

“What’re you talking about, Sakurai?” The deserved honorific was quickly applied.

Sakurai waived the respectful address and tabled the meal on top of the stout dresser. “For you, Kagami-san. I know I said later, but I finished early.”

“Screw the food. What do you mean ‘he’s telling the truth?’ How long have you been listening?”

Kuroko wondered, too.

“Long enough,” Sakurai said, his voice shaking.

The secretary was known for his timid and reclusive nature. Tone always soft and weak. Composure something instigated by an outside force. It was rare for Sakurai to emote much beyond mild paranoia and oversensitive anxiety. And treading on the brim of sobbing was especially disconcerting. Which left Kuroko wondering where these sudden emotions were coming from? The man’s shoulders sputtered and he fought to control it.

“Sakurai-san, is everything alright?” Realizing he was an outsider didn’t mean he couldn’t be concerned. After all, the secretary had never wronged him before.

“No,” the secretary sniveled and Kuroko caught Kagami fidget uncomfortably. “This is all my fault. I did this.” Tears slid down reddening cheeks that the man cleared with his sleeve. “If only I hadn’t told him.”

*Told who what?

Kagami seemed to be thinking the same thing as he stepped forward and said, in a controlled tone, “How is this your fault? What are you talking about?”

Sakurai took a moment to collect himself and Kuroko was grateful that the prince’s temper had been ebbed. By what, he didn’t know. Nor did he care. Whatever made extracting what he wanted to know easier. Sucking a deep breath, the secretary leveled a defeated stare on them and said, “There’s something I must tell you both about Aomine-san.”

Skepticism screwed Kagami’s face and he elbowed the prince’s ribs. “What is it?”

“The truth about his parentage.”

“And how would you know that,” Kagami asked.

“Because I was Imayoshi Nori’s midwife.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

He’d shown a titanic leap in logic and complete disregard for judgment. All within a week.

He was a fool.

No. Aomine had said it best.

He was a goddamn idiot.

Chapter Notes

What even are words. Uh. Well, I guess I've had enough time to finish overviewing this chapter to finally post it. (circa two weeks ago)

A lot of information was disclosed here, hence the word count. (gomen) I hope you enjoy this chapter. The climax is coming soon. And as always, thank you for your patience.

Aomine’s body tingled, joints vibrating like bees confined to a glass container. A distorted black and white scenario played across his mind, images whipping by too fast to identify as anything more than blobs of muted color. Sounds were muffled, suppressed and barely comprehensible. He felt the pounding of his feet against uneven earth and a sharp tepid chill stroked the back of his throat. He twisted his head to call over his shoulder, but no voice came out. An intense heat barreled from behind, enraged and vengeful. His foot caught something rugged and the warmth consumed him.

Both he and it slammed to the ground.

His eyes shot open. His heart squeezed tight as his lungs ventilated air quickly.

His gaze found a timber ceiling and the mild aroma of aloe and mint hinted the room, barely disguising the poignant draft of antiseptic and disinfectant. Abating the jostling effect the scents unleashed on his swimming brain, he confirmed that he had somehow found himself in the infirmary ward of the Ice temple. The scorching heat that had swallowed him was gone. Though not entirely. A tender cocoon surrounded his left hand.

He tilted his head to catch the sparkle of a familiar band around a dainty and beautiful finger. Following up the slender arm led him to the blue face of Momoi Satsuki.

“Hey,” he said, voice raspy from sleep.

Despite her expression, one that came in tow with a multitude of questions he didn’t want to answer to, he felt her thumb glide comfortingly across his knuckles.
“How long have I been out?”

The gravel in his tone would adjust itself eventually, and clearing his throat would probably agitate the testy swarm of ache ensnaring his head. Coupled with the borderline nauseous odor of herbal and chemical pharmaceuticals, he restrained the reflex.

“How long enough,” Satsuki said.

He wasn’t happy with the answer. That could mean an hour. It could mean ten. But he decided not to get critical with her. His brain was sloshing with unexplained affliction and he palmed his forehead to concentrate the maelstrom. A vicious sting bit back beneath a patch and he hissed.

Sliding his hand from hers, he lifted onto an elbow and palpated the covering gently. Soft and dimpled, fastened by abrasive tape. Gauze.

He looked to Satsuki to question the arbitrary medical aid but noted the sudden impatience that flushed her face.

“What’s even going on with you, Dai-chan?”

“Aside from naptime knockouts, nothing new.” He tested the area again and drew his hand away when the same sting pinched back.

Satsuki heaved a sigh and hid her face in her hands. Aomine remained still, wondering if he’d done something to invoke this. He couldn’t remember anything that had happened after he fled the fort, Kagami hot on his heels. The whole incident was unclear and in that moment he tried to restore his memory. Nothing beyond the escape into the Russian wilderness came to him. As he sat on the hospital futon, awaiting the incoming diatribe from Satsuki, he made a mental note to administer a new split lip to the prince’s handsome mug. Assuming Kagami would even be quiet and rational enough to listen to him. That goddamn idiot.

Satsuki still held her head, so he cycled through the possibilities. His foggy brain hadn’t the symptoms of his usual hangover. No residual adrenaline lingered and he hadn’t the taste of good liquor on his tongue. Aside from what felt like a nasty scrape on his forehead, he felt no other erupting knots or bruising. His joints instigated some soreness and his back muscles could do with a generous tenderizing. What the hell happened yesterday?

Eager to find out, and convinced she held the answer, he decided to try.

“Did I drink Nebuya under the table or something?”

She scoffed and sniffed, one hand shoving long pink locks from her face. Red diffused around moist eyes and Aomine’s mouth dried. He must have really screwed up.

“I thought you loved me, Daiki.”

The answer came reflexively. “I do.”

“At one time, maybe. When it meant that you could confide in me.”

He resented the accusation and scooted to the top of the futon, sitting up straight. She likewise straightened and he understood what that meant. In rare circumstances had he used his immense stature to intimidate those smaller than himself. The board of directors early in his tenure as Ambassador. Choice attendants who hadn’t the common sense to observe his less hospitable moods and leave him to his peace. Wakamatsu more than a few times. Even Imayoshi during his
lengthy spell of youth rebellion. But never Satsuki. Any disagreements between them were intimately hashed out, both bold and unrelenting. That she was once again staring him down, even as he looked down at her sitting on a wooden stool, meant she had a point to prove. And that he wasn’t being given a way out.

He squinted and tried to keep the insult from his voice, “What the hell’s that supposed to mean? I don’t lie to you, Satsuki.”

“Call it what you want. Lying. Waiting for the opportune moment.” Her stare hardened. “Forcing your partner of thirty-four years to withhold that you’d been brutally attacked by the prince of the Fire Apparitions because it was classified.” The emphasis on the word bit hard and he couldn’t stop himself from wincing at the rebuke.

“It wasn’t a big deal. I handled it.”

“Short of what?” Her voice rose and she threw her arms out. “An almost third degree burn? Or the cataclysmic disintegration of international relationships that were to result if he killed you?”

“I said I handled it.”

Satsuki exasperated a stressed laugh and stood. She palmed her forehead and paced beside the futon.

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “You handled it fabulously, Daiki.”

“What do you want me to say, Satsuki? Sorry, sure as shit ain’t gonna cut it.”

She sighed again and drew near the futon. “You’re right. It won’t.”

She hovered close, one knee pressed to the bedding, and inched his shirt up on the right side. The cool air hadn’t teased his wound, last left unattended. He identified a new dressing, applied with economical precision. A conservative measure of bandages and gauze. Definitely Satsuki’s work.

Head low, he lifted his gaze to find dissatisfied eyes looking back. For a moment, they were silent.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it, Daiki, when I have to hear about this from Akashi Seijuurou.”

He registered her betrayed trust in the way she quickly averted eye contact and shielded the burn from view. She leaned away and reclaimed the stool.

He picked his head up, loosening his muscles, and let gravity dip his head back where it met the timber sheathing with a whispered thump. What else was he supposed to do? Satsuki had been the one constant in his life, the one thing that had coasted with him through the tumultuous avenues and corkscrewed his life offered. She possessed secrets about him that even Imayoshi, his own family, was unaware of. They talked secrets, dreams, ambitions, failures, desires. Things among the taboo and things ridiculously childish. They fought, made up, and put it in the past. Family was the capital principle in Aomine’s life. Imayoshi, Tetsu, Satsuki. To them all, he had been at his most vulnerable and his most guarded.

But never, until now, so guarded that he would have to choose between those he loved indefinitely.

How she had discovered that Tetsu knew more than Aomine was willing to disclose wasn’t a cryptic riddle. Contrary to what she believed, he hadn’t forbid the shadow from telling her the truth. He asked that Tetsu divert her and allow him that honor. As her friend. As her ex-husband. As her family.
Faraway chatter from down the hall and adjoining rooms accompanied the otherwise ambient silence. As they sat, he fished for something, anything, to allay her anxiety.

He knew it was pathetic, but it was all he had. And what he really felt.

So he said, “I didn’t want to frighten you.”

She said nothing and he worried she may be cooking up the ultimate remark that may make or break their relationship. If there were anything that terrified him more than the dismay of living life unaccomplished, it was being abandoned by loved ones.

One of many intimate details he’d shared with her before.

A faint chuckle set his nerves on fire and he stared at her. Satsuki pinched the bridge of her nose.

“And which part, Daiki?” She didn’t give him a chance to answer and locked eyes with him. “You getting attacked while hunting? You getting burned by Kagami Taiga? Or that I would be immeasurably furious and hurt that you couldn’t even articulate a way to tell me?”

The perpetuated use of his given name was irritating him. Once breathed in moments of privacy or laughed in times of domestic jubilance or sniveled in crippling emotional turmoil was now equipped for unsolicited ridicule.

And he did not like that.

And as she spoke, he sensed there was more to this than just the burn.

Perhaps whatever had happened yesterday that had him delivered to the infirmary with a head wound, a body-wide ache, and a list of unanswered questions.

To her blatant disappointment, he said nothing.

Satsuki groaned and let her hands clap her thighs as she turned away from him. “When you’re not putting me at arm’s length, you’re inconveniencing Tetsu-kun.”

The bold declaration ignited a fire in his chest and he snapped a glare at her.

“You wanna talk about keeping shit from each other?”

He hadn’t censored his anger. If she wasn’t going to, he wouldn’t. It had been long in the running and he’d kept his mouth shut, observing from a distance. For almost twenty-five years, he watched as Satsuki and Tetsu interacted. The subtle gestures in passing. How one would pluck up the courage to make a move and the other would move, as if to intercept, only to back away and stall out any prospect of progression. The countless times he had found them in each other’s company while he was otherwise preoccupied. Yet neither spoke a word about their time together. What they did talk about, in abundance, was him. And as great as the two lovesick interlopers were at withholding their own romantic entanglement, they were equally as proficient at failing to keep their opinions of him to themselves.

She whipped back around, her eyes crinkling vindictively. “This isn’t about me, Daiki.”

He sensed she was propping up her defenses but he didn’t intend to allow her time to fortify them.

He turned to face her. “You wanna complain about how I keep secrets? Well, what about you and Tetsu?”
Surprise gripped her and melted to reveal a characteristic uneasiness. One that conveyed that she’d been caught retaining and didn’t plan to explain herself.

Well, too damn bad.

“Tetsu-kun has nothing to do with this.”

“You must think I’m a liar and stupid.”

“Don’t you put words in my mouth,” her voice wavered a bit. “I didn’t say—”

“I see you guys talking about me constantly, when you think I’m not looking. Whispering like I’m pitiful.”

“Stop.”

“Then you gesture to me as the two of you dispense with your opinions of how I’ve done what I shouldn’t. Or why I can’t just behave myself.”

“Daiki, stop it.”

“The two of you stand there and pretend I’m not within fucking earshot as you lament about me so much because you’ve been burdened as my babysitters.”

Satsuki jerked out of her seat and glued her hand across his mouth. Her knee speared the futon and he felt her weight leaning forward. Trying to keep more words, which neither had wanted to hear, from spilling out.

A tense moment passed where they said nothing. Their eyes traced each other’s faces, looking for a sign. Of what, Aomine wasn’t sure.

Feeling her trembling, he cupped her hand and uncovered his mouth. She resigned without a fight and rolled back onto the stool. He maintained hold of her hand.

“Looks like we’ve both broken the unwritten rule.”

It was quiet for a few seconds and Aomine thought he may have misinterpreted her submission.

He breathed again when she spoke.

“It was actually one of our wedding vows.”

He was glad the tension deflated to a comfortable level.

“Was it?”

She smiled and sniffed away the manifested tears that welled behind stubborn eyes. “Stupid Dai-chan.”

The familiar address lifted the weight in his stomach and he relaxed. He watched her collect her hair over one shoulder. Words crawled up the back of his throat and he thought to swallow them. He hardly ever expressed pretty or overly-romantic words, even to Satsuki, making his emotions valid through actions. Mendacity wasn’t one of his popular personality traits and he hated having resorted to it. She deserved better than that. So, for the second time in the past few days, he was going to break character.
Just for her.

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her palm. She lifted her face and his gaze softened.

“You know I love you.” He paused. “And trust you.”

Her lip quivered marginally and she quickly pinned it with her teeth. She nodded.

“I know. I’m sorry. We’ve both done wrong.”

She resumed control of her hand and stroked her thumb across his cheek. Then she stood, leaned forward, and kissed him. A chaste, tender touch that he remembered fondly. He hadn’t expected that but absorbed its message.

She seated herself once again and the feeling of normalcy settled.

“I heard about Hyuuga-san.”

No emotion carried her tone but the proffered name revived an uncomfortable image. One he hoped hadn’t been imbedded in his memory, but, inevitably, hadn’t washed away with whatever events awarded him a head wound. He recalled the pain-stricken face, the betrayal in the Kaizer’s glossed eyes, and the large puncture through the man’s chest. At the time, he hadn’t questioned why he was so quick to resuscitate Hyuuga. He thought it instinct. But introspection told him that his morals, his intrinsic code of ethics, compelled him to save the man’s life.

It had been a first for Aomine. The many men and women he had killed in his lifetime, the Shadow Apparitions who’d come hired to erase his existence, had been struck down with professional ease. There had been struggles. Close calls. But none had clung to life, those last moments of agonizing consciousness, as the Kaizer had that afternoon. Watching the man die left a sour taste in his mouth that saturated as Satsuki recited the name. And he couldn’t swallow it now that it had resurfaced.

“I didn’t do it,” he said. “You know I didn’t.”

She nodded and wove her fingers together between her knees as she leaned forward again. “It’s impossible. Outside of your principles,” she paused. “I’ve heard the people say wonderful things in your memory. So many of them applaud what they believe you’d done. But there are also those who dissent. Who have muttered terrible things. You’re either a harbinger or a knight.”

Aomine couldn’t stop himself from scowling. “Fickle folk are so charitable, aren’t they?”

“Tetsu-kun was furious when he overhead the news this morning. Whatever may come of this, he and I will support you. Unlike the rest of the temple, we know who you really are.”

He appreciated that. Few things had ever been so reliable as Satsuki and Tetsu’s unquestionable fidelity. Had he been remotely religious, he would kneel and thank Mother Nature for bestowing him with two beautiful people who really cared for him, despite his copious inadequacies and predictable shortcomings.

But she had just reminded him.

“Where is Tetsu?”

The content drained from her face and she cast her glance aside. He didn’t like that look and hovered close. His tired muscles protested, but he ignored them.
“Satsuki. We just had this talk about withholding.” His tone was firm but not demanding. Experience supplied that nothing was earned from her that way.

Her eyes trained on the floor and he was disappointed that she wouldn’t look at him. Before he could speak, she cupped his hand, applied an assuring stroke with her thumb, and stood. He beckoned an answer as she strode for the portal. And again as she reached it.

“Satsuki.” Undisguised urgency carried his tone. “Where is Tetsu?”

She gripped the mouth of the entryway arch, as if she needed its support to deliver the words. She canted her head and feigned a smile.

“He’s on assignment. No details were given. You know how the Dan is.”

Her disclosure was hardly believable. Though, the weak explanation transferred something unsaid that Aomine detected. He remembered the word she had used to describe the shadow’s forwarded secrecy about the incident with Kagami in the forest all those days ago.

*Classified.*

She lingered only a moment more and then rolled around the corner, leaving without another word.

—

Kagami stood stark silent. Had he heard the secretary correctly? The words ricocheted through his skull and punched his guilt hard.

“What do you mean Aomine Daiki is a fucking *Lightning Apparition*?” Little was done to mask his surprise.

Sakurai had offered that discussing the private matter in an easily accessible place within the fort was a bad idea and, with some deliberation, decided on the armory. With the troops already geared up and waiting to leap into the ring to assist the Fire against the temple, there was no reason for anyone to venture to the dank subterranean level of the structure, the little man had reasoned. Kuroko accepted the proposal without almost a second thought. As they coursed the halls, the shadow had been mindful of his trespassing and either hid behind Kagami or entangled himself in the fields of shadows that patched the stone and runners as they were led further down. Kuroko’s stamina, Kagami noted, had been impaired and the smaller man had nearly lost his footing on the stone risers as they descended to the armory.

As he waited for an answer, the secretary rifling through a file he’d secured on the way, he studied Kuroko. The man’s weight was entirely supported on his folded arms, propped on the back of a sturdy wooden chair. Lines of fatigue scratched his eyelids and he looked so weary that Kagami wouldn’t be surprised if the shadow gave into the allure and slumped to the flagstones that sheathed the armory. He wondered why he wouldn’t just sit and the constant fidgeting as Kuroko leaned on one leg, then the other, was getting annoying.

“It’s as I said, Kagami-san,” Sakurai interrupted his observation. “Aomine-san is one of us.”

An aged and folded sheet of parchment was produced and unveiled across the thick unpolished table centering the room among oak shelving and weapon receptacles. Time had done little to
deteriorate the quality of the handwritten words. Kagami noted a colorful crest at the top of the sheet, a blue-tinged badge where a black panther—muzzle crinkled and fangs bared—broke a ring where emblazoned within was unorthodox script—a motto that read “Family Above All Else.” He had seen this type of paper before many times, inducted several thousand years ago, as a way to provide veracity to an Apparition’s claim to heritage as well as tabulate the pureblood population. A pedigree.

They all leaned close and examined the name with the help of torches mounted to iron perches. Kagami silently translated the wispy calligraphic penmanship at the top of the sheet. *The Aomine Family Registry, established MDCCXL*. He decrypted the Roman numerals. 1740. Names he was unfamiliar with stared back at him, their script penned by hand from the noted Apparition, all unique in stroke. Sakurai pointed to the bottommost selection of the family, finger indicating one parent.


His brows dipped as the little man’s digit followed the line stemming from one denoting the parents’ marriage to their child, the name stylized in the father’s hand. His stare penetrated the ink and he felt Sakurai looking at him. Kuroko, too.


His stomach knotted and his diaphragm vacuumed the air tight into his lungs. The name indicated by Sakurai’s finger taunted him. A familiar languid baritone invaded his brain, chastising his brash stupidity. His lack of common sense. He shook the voice away and tipped his eyes to meet the secretary’s.

“How,” he began, “in a century, could Aomine have been a Lightning Apparition and never known it?”

Sakurai reached for the same file he’d drawn the pedigree from. Peeling away the cover, he shifted the sheets within around until he unearthed a photocopied page he’d seen several times in the textbooks at the Academy. The secretary laid the paper over the pedigree.

Another hand-drawn image. The technique possessed no properties of proportion and looked as if done without lifting the instrument from the page. A woman, daubed with earthy brown and green shades interspersed among smudges of blue and white, kneeled in the bottom right corner. Her posture was distressed, arms rose beseeching and face contorted with an admixture of sadness and pain. Her swollen belly was torn open and from it shot a linear jagged bolt of lightning. Beyond the bolt was a child, face etched with a furious expression, its finger jabbed accusingly at the woman. He regarded the footnote above a passage of text.

*Birth of the Lightning.*

“When you think Lightning, Kagami-san, what words come to mind?” Sakurai asked.

It wasn’t hard to generate a few. After all, the Mother Nature myth submitted that the Lightning were supposedly the surrogate parent to the Fire, creating the race after ripping through Mother’s belly where the Fire rampantly set the world ablaze. Both had been vindictive, destructive spirits, the myth posited. One harbored greed, the other fury. And both had been contained, their birth deferred in favor of the other Apparitions. The Inferiors.
Not that Kagami subscribed to the myth. But with this new revelation, he found that consistencies had coincided between fact and fiction. The alliance of the Fire and Lightning tribes. Their similar temperaments and dispositions. And how proximity to Aomine hadn’t immediately thrown out the same red flags that would have soared had the man actually been an Ice Apparition.

A series of the man’s expressions played across his mind and Kagami didn’t like what he’d seen.

“Rage. Anger. Violence.” Contemplative silence lapsed every word and he nearly allowed the screaming guilt within to break eye contact with the secretary.

He’d shown a titanic leap in logic and complete disregard for judgment. All within a week.

He was a fool.

No. Aomine had said it best.

He was a goddamn idiot.

“Exactly,” Sakurai said. “As you know, Apparitions maintain vessels, our human receptacles. And, like other organisms, we also maintain defensive mechanisms to protect ourselves. A common trigger is fear. Another is excitement.”

Kuroko edged in with a solemn voice, “Then there’s anger.”

Kagami understood where the two were leading him, but had to ask, “And you’re telling me that, for one hundred years, Aomine’s just never been that pissed off?”

“You surely noticed, Kagami-kun?”

He had. But that didn’t mean it translated. Actually, it was hardly conceivable that a person could go through a third of their life without experiencing one of the most primal emotions. That a mastermind could redirect emotions or squash them before they materialized into a tangible recognition that the person would interpret. Yet, somehow, that’s apparently what Imayoshi had done. Kagami searched his now hyperactive memory. The way Aomine’s face twisted with a flash of pain when he’d harassed him and prodded at deep wounds probed his brain. How the man tried hard to compose himself in the wake of a character assassination, failing to secure a firm handle on his wayward emotions.

Kuroko seemed to notice that he was struggling to accept the information and cleared his throat. “The day before he came here, Aomine-kun had been upset by the news of the Lord’s ultimatum. Thinking that he’d no doubt be brought before the mercy of two sovereigns. The agitation was palpable. The combat squad chief had been coaxing him into releasing stress with their usual horseplay and when Aomine-kun wasn’t receptive to the invitation, the chief elbowed his concealed burn to incite admission. The chief tried making amends about it and Aomine-kun got him to leave the room to fetch Momoi-san.” His characteristically controlled speech seemed even more delayed as melancholy flooded his voice. “He’d been in so much pain.”

The shadow’s face sunk in dismay at the memory the words were evoking. Eyes had gradually fallen from meeting his and Sakurai’s and were now sewn to the table, unfocused and depressed.

“He told me,” Kuroko continued after a moment. “Every time I get pissed it starts tingling. Like someone’s poking me with needles. And the more upset I get, the worse the pain.”

Blue eyes found Kagami.
“I hadn’t wanted to believe it then, either. But at the same time, I had been happy to think that—maybe—Aomine-kun could finally embrace an identity as an Apparition. A tangible sign that he belonged somewhere.”

Kagami broke eye contact and studied the pedigree once more, Aomine’s immediate family still visible beneath the photocopied image.

“Aomine-san was taken in by the Dan when he was only a month old. Knowing who his parents were, fearing what he may become, the Dan must have labored for decades to hamper the most dominant trigger of the Apparitions.” The man paused as emotion tightened his windpipe. “Anger.”

He now knew it was not only sensible but attainable. He’d seen proof that the selected emotion was difficult for Aomine to grasp. But he was skeptical to believe that Imayoshi was capable of such deception. Such malevolent manipulation of his own nephew.

He regarded Kuroko and said, “How would he even keep track of Aomine’s behavior? Guardian or not, one third of his current life was coated with the same teen rebellion as the rest of us, if not more grating and everlasting for him. There’s no way Imayoshi had eyes on him at all times.”

The shadow scowled and the expression surprised both he and Sakurai, judging by the way the secretary’s brows inclined quizzically.

Scrutiny flooded the smaller man’s eyes. “The combat squad chief was always insistent that Aomine-kun remain calm. Level-headed and composed people prove less vexing to deal with, certainly. But the slightest aggravation attracted the chief’s consolation. Imayoshi, as well, had more than a few times reminded Aomine-kun to relax when his temper manifested.” A thoughtful look furrowed the shadow’s brow tighter. “Not to mention, Nebuya-san did well to exhaust Aomine-kun’s energy with physical competition on what was sometimes a spontaneous basis.”

The implication brought the secretary’s hand to his mouth and distress washed over his paling face. “To think his own family would manipulate him.” His voice cracked as he continued, “He was only a baby.”

Kagami said nothing. Neither did Kuroko.

His brain somersaulted, churning violently as pangs of regret clashed within him. From the start, he’d read Aomine all wrong. The secretary’s revelation, compounded by the shadow’s disclosures, attacked him relentlessly. Reflecting now, Aomine’s actions, his mannerisms, unfolded to a cardinal truth that he’d been too jaded to realize. The man was no Neutral. He’d been a pawn, orchestrated in a grand scheme by a twisted uncle. And that hadn’t been the most crucial detail.

Aomine was next in line to inherit the Lightning crown.

A fact that Imayoshi, no doubt, planned to exploit.

And Aomine would be caught completely off guard.

The deduction flooded him and he jerked his head to meet Kuroko’s startled eyes. They’d both come to the same conclusion.

“Imayoshi’s going to over throw the monarchy.”

Kagami’s brow tightened. “And once it’s gone, what happens to Aomine?”
Tension suffocated the stale air as the three stared between each other.

Kuroko pushed off the chair and stepped back, grabbing hold of himself. “We need to get Aomine-kun out of the temple.”

The shadow looked at him as he spoke.

He inclined from stooping over the table and shook his head. “We?” He hadn’t intended to counter skeptically.

Coming to the conclusive truth behind the enigma of Aomine Daiki had done more than right a novel’s worth of false conceptions. It took a sledgehammer to Kagami’s confident assertion, one that hadn’t led him wrong before, and obliterated it. The same confidence that entirely misjudged and nearly led him to kill an innocent man. Not once, but twice. And now Kuroko expected him to jump onboard with a barely-cocked rescue plan for a man who, for all Kagami knew, may be waiting for his chance to even the score. It had been the terms of their entire association, hadn’t it?

What was he supposed to do? Waltz into the temple and, once he found the man, apologize about the two near-death experiences, and then traipse right out the back door together?

He couldn’t fathom the theatrics of their reunion and the unknown terrified him. His guilt may as well corrode him down to the marrow. Because there was no conceivable way he could face Aomine again without the encounter turning violent.

He leveled his best disinterested stare on Kuroko. “I don’t think so.”

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Kuroko stared hard at Kagami. The refusal was hollow, he knew. Symptomatic of the prince’s hesitation to answer and failed attempt to mask his blatant guilt. The scrunch of his brow and tight corners of his mouth consistent with a man harbored to his convictions. Recalcitrance and the overflowing arrogance aside, Kuroko trusted his estimation of the prince’s character to be susceptible to reason, not so myopic to ignore what could be argued as cold hard fact.

And Sakurai provided the very evidence that verified his recent suspicions.

Incontrovertible evidence of Imayoshi’s treachery.

Of Aomine’s claim to heritage.

He couldn’t curb the sloping hook of his mouth as he stepped around the chair and approached the stubborn fool. The prince stiffened but stood tall.

“Aomine-kun did not kill Hyuuga-san,” he said.

Sakurai went silent but Kuroko could identify his silent protests, hands raising as if trying to mediate an imminent altercation.

Kagami said nothing and shifted his gaze aside.

He could sense the man was uncomfortable being confronted about the issue. Not that he cared. So he decided that he needed to puncture the prince’s comfort zone. But he remembered his promise
before in the infirmary. No shadows this time.

Two strides put him almost toe-to-toe with the prince and if the proximity hadn’t alerted Kagami, Kuroko’s glare certainly did. Surprise and upset fixed those fiery depths.

“If we don’t remove Aomine-kun from the temple now, Imayoshi may embroil him in another stunt that actually kills him.”

The man parted his lips, as if to speak, but clenched his jaw. His brow wrinkled, frustrated. For a moment, he was reminded of Aomine and his incapability to successfully emote, facial expressions twisting and screwing, speaking more than the mouth would be allowed.

He didn’t have time for this.

Aomine didn’t, either.

Kagami was avoiding the issue and projecting his petulant self-deprecation. Recognizing he misjudged yet failing to accept and rectify the situation. Another trait the prince shared with his partner.

Which made the next choice of action easy.

“So,” Kuroko stepped away, hands raised in a feint gesture of defeat. “You’ll let an innocent man die.”

The man’s eye twitched but no other reaction followed.

So he continued, “You’re so adamant about preserving this contest with Aomine-kun, Kagami-kun. Something Akashi-san is already aware of, isn’t he? And the Fire’s incursion means the Lord also knows that, supposedly, Aomine-kun was involved in the events befalling the Kaizer’s demise.”

Kagami’s eyes crinkled in a sneer and he maintained his staring contest with an empty weapon rack across the room.

“Do you think even for one second that Akashi-san is going to consider your trivial promise and spare Aomine-kun’s life? Your arrangement with Aomine-kun means nothing to him at the expense of a comrade’s life. The penalty for regicide, internationally, is death.”

The prince erupted explosively, flames popping from exposed skin as he yelled, “I fucking know that. What the hell am I supposed to say to him now? You didn’t see his face, Kuroko.”

He couldn’t help cringing at the outburst, but unlike Sakurai, who quailed and ducked behind the table, Kuroko stood firm. The fury diffusing Kagami’s face slowly drained as the prince evened his breath and dialed down the yellow-orange flickers across his brow, cheeks, and nape. He resigned to distressed frustration and evaded Kuroko’s stare once again.

Despite himself, he smiled.

“You want to make amends for your hostile approach?” he asked. “Then help me retract Aomine-kun from the temple.”

“You can’t honestly expect that to work. Do I look five years old to you?”

“At times.”

He held his hands in supplication as Kagami threatened to squeeze his head and it seemed to tame
the impulse.

That the man seemed less resistant now was gratifying but he needed to secure the prince’s total compliance. He hadn’t planned on revealing what he was about to say to anyone, not even Momoii, content to survive it as a memory to improve his station as Aomine’s shadow. But he decided now—considering all other alternatives—that it was something the man needed to hear.

Heeding that the prince was cooperating, he backed out of Kagami’s personal space and noticed an immediate slackening in his back and shoulders.

“Do you know how I found Aomine-kun?” He began and red eyes found him instantly. “I was searching for him this morning. He’d been summoned away the day before and I’d been detained to await his return. Lightning struck the temple where he resided. Destroyed the first and two floors in the quadrant holding his chambers. I navigated the rubble and found him among the wreckage of roofing and ceiling beams.” Kagami’s brows drew tight and he paused to allow the words to sink in. “I saw static coiling around him, how brief it was. And when I tried to gauge his mental state, to determine if he was even alive, he said only one thing to me. Your name.”

Sakurai, who’d aborted hiding when the tension deflated, interjected from one of the wooden chairs he now occupied. “You say you saw static? And that following the lightning strike found Aomine-san immersed in debris?”

Kuroko glanced to the secretary, feeling the prince’s gaze still on him.

“Believe me when I say I tried not to assume. It would be different had he been completely buried.”

The secretary forwarded attention to Kagami, whose face maintained a look of surprise. “And you remember nothing that happened before you blacked out?”

“Just my merry jaunt through the backwoods.” The sharp rebut—imbued with sarcasm—startled the little man.

“I’m sorry,” Sakurai fumbled his fingers and avoided the prince’s eyes. “I just—”

“I told you already. I caught him, chased him outside, and that’s the end of it.”

Fighting a spell of fright, the secretary continued. “Where soon after, you were struck by lightning.”

Kuroko shot a look to the larger man and saw an unpleasant crease edging taut lips. This was a new detail.

“Is this true, Kagami-kun?” he asked.

The prince crossed his arms and grunted, “Apparently so.”

Somehow the information was comforting to hear. Not that he rejoiced knowing Kagami was nearly electrocuted. But this divulgence from the prince and secretary was invaluable. Aomine finally found an identity. The obscure fable of Neutrality could at last be purged and his partner allowed to lead a normal life. His suspicions of the Dan had been confirmed as well, which delighted him as much as it infuriated him. Imayoshi’s treachery would not escape public attention and the man would suffer for his transgression.

Yet he had no hope of confronting Imayoshi until Aomine was removed from the premises.
And Kagami still hadn’t been coerced.

His patience was nearly exhausted, so he decided to resort to elementary persuasion. Less sophisticated approaches seemed to affect the prince more easily.

“You’ve figured it out, haven’t you, Kagami-kun?”

The prince said nothing.

“You struck him and he struck you back. You both bear the other’s mark.”

Alert flooded Kagami’s eyes as he honed in on Kuroko.

“The score is settled,” he concluded.

“How did you,” the man looked to Sakurai, who shrunk reflexively. “Did you tell him?”

The secretary was shaking his head before the prince finished but Kuroko jumped in to spare the man Kagami’s inability to level his tone.

“Context clues are a wonderful tool. Having established that the last thing you remembered was confronting Aomine-kun in the forest, and factoring in Sakurai-san’s account that you’d been struck by lightning, it became evident that the bolt that struck you was not naturally conceived. Rather, it was Aomine-kun escaping.”

He was glad that no confusion or skepticism crossed the prince’s face. Surely he would understand, as Fire Apparitions employed similar mechanisms to evade a life-threatening situation. Like all other Apparitions, absorbing oneself into their matter of origin served as a temporary safeguard against mortal injury. Kuroko resorted to the depths of suitable shadows in the same way that Kagami would envelop and merge with a magnificent blaze. Aomine had done no different, ascending into the charcoal stretch looming above in a brilliant flash of bluish purple when threatened with death.

“I’m certain,” he pressed, “there is a mark somewhere on your body that you’re hiding. Otherwise why become so sensitive about what would normally be inconsequential?”

Kagami’s lips pursed a thin line and his eyes sunk despondently to the flagstones.

He repressed the urge to vent his agitation. He couldn’t maintain this battle any longer. His partner needed his help now. With or without Kagami.

Wordlessly he turned for the door.

Sakurai jumped from his chair and hurried around the bulky table to intercept him.

“Kuroko.”

Both men stopped and faced the prince. Resistance was no longer visible in the larger man’s eyes or posture. The resolute gleam in his now confident gaze was reassuring and Kuroko released a relaxing breath.

The prince drew near and pinched his brows in scrutiny as he addressed him, “If you’re wrong about this—”

“Thirty-four years, Kagami-kun.”
A grunt was his answer.

As he attended to the portal, a sharp pain speared his ribs. The arduous persistence to engage fatigued muscles crumbled and he clutched his side as his body rolled to the floor. From the stones, he tilted his gaze to the ceiling, identifying a satisfied look on Kagami’s face. The man’s hand rested supine, fingers uniformed and tight, reminiscent of a spearhead. Then he knew.

*Payback.*

The offending hand was tucked into a pocket and the prince stepped over him, across the threshold.

The prince tipped his head over his shoulder. “Well? Lead the way.”

Kuroko surrendered to a groan and let his head lull to the cool stone.

“Give me a moment.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

For all his declared competence, the idiot hadn’t thought to invite objectivity just long enough to realize that the only thing linking Aomine to the murder was his own self-imposed fantasy.

Anger wormed back into his brain and he cupped his eyes with a weary groan.

He growled and lifted his hands exasperatedly. “What a goddamn asshole.”

Chapter Notes

This was going to be a much longer chapter, but another 6k worder seemed cruel. So I broke it up and am posting both today. Feeling a little restless, I'm not gonna lie. The fic stresses me out for some inexplicable reason.

Regardless of my shortcomings, I hope you enjoy these next two installments.

Pleasurably warm water wrapped Aomine’s legs as he lie on his back on slick flat stones. Following the emotional discussion with Satsuki, he had rested in the infirmary long enough to reboot his bearings and move without igniting overbearing pain. He resolved that the next time he and Kagami met he would bestow the loud-mouthed asshole with a similar dosing of bedridden ache and fatigue to go along with reopening that split lip. The walk to the outdoor baths hadn’t been so taxing, the late afternoon air remedying the noticeable strain in his knees and shoulders with a welcome dose of humidity. Few people occupied the area as he’d navigated across the central deck to the boardwalk of the first temple. A break in the railing opened to a cobbled pathway snaking to the bathhouse tucked in a manicured thicket, where the pale gold steam announced business hours without obstruction. He’d entered the lobby and asked the attendant to tabulate the assembly of patrons in the outdoor baths. To his comfort, there were none. Public indecency wasn’t a sin in his book and he was more than tolerable to strip and soak in the baths with other men of the temple. So long as alcohol wasn’t a dominating factor.

The burn still posed a problem that he had yet to forge a believable explanation for.

The baths, sento as they were designated by their irritating overseas neighbors, were a much appreciated borrowed concept and Aomine made it a mission to enjoy the outdoor offering at least once a week. Rarely did he seek the stuffy confines of the indoor bath. Quicker to fall victim to steam and he’d had more than one embarrassing incident that followed a lengthy dip.

After a dire need to clean himself of residual soil and grime, he’d slid into the hot embrace. The heat bit at his overstressed muscles and as soon as he acclimated to the temperature, he stretched and twisted to loosen them. His wound seemed to accept the tender lick of the water as he’d moved about and he reminded himself to apologize to Satsuki about disregarding her hard work so soon after application.
Roughly an hour following repeated submergence, he hoisted himself onto the stone lip, draped his towel across his bare loins, and reclined to the stones. His calves and feet, especially agitated, enjoyed further treatment.

The sky remained obstinately overcast but the darkening pewter told him that night would fall in a few hours. Which left him some time alone before he would seek out his partner and ex-wife. A quiet dinner with the two of them was well deserved, he thought. More than that, he felt like he owed Satsuki more of an apology for the way he attacked her in the ward. His duplicity hadn’t been malevolent and that he felt inclined to hold the truth from her hadn’t sat well with him. He recalled Kagami’s repeated jabs about his misguided trust in Imayoshi. Now it seemed to have metastasized and affected those he had been emotionally invested with.

His hand found the burn and gingerly slicked his fingers across the aggressed skin. It was still inflamed and sensitive. Sleek scar tissue ran below his searching hand and he envisioned the extent of the damage once the wound healed. A permanent brand. Much like his status as a Neutral spawn.

The mere idea angered him and he swallowed the bane. Yet the thought of the Fire prince hadn’t left along with it. Since he’d regained some grip on reality following their confrontation, what vestiges he remembered, the man had flooded his brain.

The prince’s face, stricken with a mutation of rage, shock, and distress, as he laid eyes on Aomine standing over the Kaizer’s corpse. The way Kagami’s eyes examined him and fell to Hyuuga, producing estimations and assumptions, forfeiting rationality to impulse. When those dazzling red orbs returned to him, a dreadful feeling clenched his gut. Any trace of exuberance was cloaked in disappointment and regret. As if Kagami had given up on him and their unspoken agreement.

How could that idiot be so narrow-minded?

Hadn’t he noticed the gaping hole in the Kaizer’s chest? One too large for Aomine’s blade to produce on its own.

And that blood hadn’t stained his face, which it would have had he stabbed the grating sovereign as Kagami believed he had. His hands and pants, certainly, but from trying to revive the fallen man. The knife? Dropped in an unprecedented moment of altruism upon a spread of fresh blood.

For all his declared competence, the idiot hadn’t thought to invite objectivity just long enough to realize that the only thing linking Aomine to the murder was his own self-imposed fantasy.

Anger wormed back into his brain and he cupped his eyes with a weary groan.

He growled and lifted his hands exasperatedly. “What a goddamn asshole.”

Emotion punctuated the last word and a frizzy net of lightning coated the back of his hands.

His eyes shot wide and he scrambled back on the slabs, flailing away the disturbance. His heart hammered and anxiety fueled his lungs to expel air quickly.

What the hell was that?

He held his hands away at a safe distance, eying them suspiciously as if they possessed minds of their own. After registering that he still maintained control over the appendages, he drew them gradually closer. No scars or redness from the static. Yet a familiar tingle exploded within the digits, one that had racked his body in varying intensities for the last week. Coinciding with his temper. Only there was no pain anymore.
“What the fucking hell was that?”

His breath was shallow and trepidation kept his heartbeat pulsing. As if enough things weren’t wrong with him already, now he had to add this anomaly to the ever-growing list.

A weak flicker crawled up his thumb and his initial response of shock shot a fork of bluish-purple across his palm.

That was odd. The sparks responded to his emotions.

Swallowing, he willed himself to relax and slumped over the edge of the bath.

Still cautious about the earlier display, he held one arm over the water and thanked himself for long limbs. He needed to test this, to be certain he wasn’t hallucinating off the sultry haze of the bath water. Ventilating a few breaths, he tensed the muscles of his hand and searched his mind for a particular memory. One that would beckon the static to return.

Kagami had washed over his brain again and instant anger erupted. At the man’s stupidly handsome face. At the crass declaration of Imayoshi’s lies. At the disappointed look he’d given Aomine in the Kaizer’s chamber at the fort.

A wire-frame of electricity pricked his fingertips and spread, consuming his hand. Diverging into further memories excited the sparks and the crackling mass ate its way up his arm, erasing the presence of his burnt skin. He’d been so trapped in thought that he hadn’t realized the energy had worked up to his shoulder until he felt whips of mild heat against his face. He was met with a body of living, breathing lightning.

He cried out and flung what little he felt of his arm and dispelled the storm with lashing throws.

As he palmed his chest, aggravated by furious beating, an image slammed into him hard. Brought about by the vibrant bluish-purple light swarming his vision not even a moment ago. The fragment condensed when he closed his eyes. Kagami’s face cleared into view. The prince was looking down at him, as if he laid on the ground, which he seemed to be as the tangible feel of sticks, leaves, and pebbles dug into his spine. Frantic emotions were coursing through him. One of his hands grasped the prince’s shirt and the other he felt clasping taut fingers squeezing his neck. The kodachi was raised high, the subtle glint of two superficial scars—the ones Aomine carved—glaring back. The sky let out a warning shot of thunder and, as the blade plunged down, his mind was assaulted with thoughts of being home in his chambers. A white light blinded him and his body numbed beyond the point of recognition.

His eyes snapped open and again he searched his hands. Tufts of electricity popped from his palms and he squashed them in his fists.

Kagami wasn’t lying.

Imayoshi was.

But he was far from being a Neutral.

He pulled his legs from the water and sprang from the stones, stalking into the changing room. His towel lay forgotten. But he didn’t care. Drying off and being mindful to modesty wasn’t important.

Shrugging and jerking into his clothes, he glided out of the establishment and hurried across the stone path that tacked the bathhouse to the temple.
His dear uncle had some explaining to do.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Kagami groaned. “A lot of good this dye job does when it accentuates the fact I have red eyes.”

“I’m not a miracle worker, Kagami-kun.”

“Hardly much of anything, really.”

He stomped on the man’s toe and Kagami shrieked.

Chapter Notes

Forgive me for I am cruel.

(Actually don't, I'm a bad person for what I've done here.)

Here is the other half of what would have been a very bulky chapter. Sorry for the length.

Edit: Wasn't happy with myself after I checked my messages this morning, so I went back and did some revisions to the chapter. Hopefully the information flows a little more smoothly.

“So, maybe you just lost me in translation somewhere,” Kagami said, “but how is you confronting Imayoshi alone a good fucking idea?”

The skepticism was as familiar as it was annoying and Kuroko sighed for what felt like the hundredth time.

“And you marching in beside me, guns blazing, is a less conspicuous approach?”

The prince scoffed and gestured to himself. “Pretty sure this hack job of a disguise you put together at the last minute insured that added measure of stealth.”

He canted his head and roved his gaze across the prince. An intermission had been needed to recover from the chop delivered to his ribs and it gave him a chance to formulate part of a plan for Kagami to escort Aomine from the temple without arousing suspicion. As a spell of charity coerced the prince to help him to his feet, he consulted with the secretary for a spare packet of hair dye. He wasn’t hopeful that one was available and couldn’t suppress his surprise when Sakurai suggested that he could probably locate one.

Fortune smiled on him and he didn’t dare stunt the serendipity. The contribution came from one of the fort’s on-duty nurses, a studied actress in Casimir Palace’s acclaimed playhouse when she
wasn’t conscripted to service the wounded and diseased. The secretary was happy to report that no questions had been asked, as Kuroko hadn’t believed the man convincing enough to fabricate an acceptable excuse.

Following a tedious explanation, provoked by Kagami balking to allow Kuroko to alter his hair for the sake of infiltrating what the prince considered enemy territory, he finally yielded and spent a good half hour hunched over a bathroom sink while Kuroko massaged the color onto his scalp.

The prince stood before him, his shaggy red hair now black.

“I can’t very well see the point in changing my appearance when you’re the one responsible for extracting Aomine-kun,” he said. “The people of the temple perceive me as a parasite in the same way a shark regards the remora fish. Hardly noticeable and tolerated so long as I keep myself occupied.”

Kagami groaned. “A lot of good this dye job does when it accentuates the fact I have red eyes.”

“I’m not a miracle worker, Kagami-kun.”

“Hardly much of anything, really.”

He stomped on the man’s toe and Kagami shrieked. He stretched to silence the cry with a hand to the prince’s mouth. A glare transmitted censure at the abuse that Kuroko rebuked with scorn.

“Would it be too much to ask you to behave?”

The man’s brows drew tight and sudden moisture slicked his palm. He whipped his hand back and scrubbed the familiar residue on his pants.

“Charming,” he frowned. “It’s a wonder women aren’t smitten with you.”

“Not my breed. And seriously, you’re telling me to behave?”

He let the defense of sexuality slide and offered an innocent glance.

The tweak in the prince’s brow told him he wasn’t in the mood and he resigned. “I’d like to maintain some air of secrecy before you alert every other man in the barracks that you’re here. The least I can do is find you a suitable uniform.”

“Which you’re taking forever to do, by the way.”

He repressed the urge to even out the other foot for the man and turned to the bin he’d pulled from a shelf in the guild’s storage shed. It wasn’t a large structure, but spacious enough for three aisles of four tier wooden racks. Sunlight penetrated the ceiling through a series of rectangular glass slits a foot wide by six feet long. Little rummaging had to be done to find what he assumed was Kagami’s size. Physical contact incurred over the last week, combined with a keen eye for observation, provided that the prince was nearly the same size as Aomine. Not just in stature but clothing size. He gripped a pair of olive cargo pants, verified the measurement on the tag, and lashed the clothing over his shoulder.

A yelp was heard and he smiled.

“Are we certain I’m the one misbehaving?”

The rhetoric and shuffling behind him allowed Kuroko to toe the bin aside uninterrupted and scour
the shelves for one containing appropriate tops. On the highest rack to the left he spotted the label and reached. His height had never been much of a concern unless it became a disadvantage. The hiss of a zipper told him Kagami was fastening the cargos and he strained to lift himself higher.

A large hand palmed the bin and a powerful presence towered behind him.

“Can you try not to kill yourself?”

He stepped back as the bin was hoisted into Kagami’s arms with no exertion. “Clothes are hardly that heavy.”

Kagami shrugged and lobbed the box at him. Reflexes acted fast and he cradled the bottom as the bulk of the weight slammed into his chest. He staggered and felt his knees threatening to buckle.

He shot a glare over the lid to the prince’s smug grin.

“You done being a dick?”

“Cause and effect, Kagami-kun,” he managed, voice rough from effort. “If you'd please?”

Kagami grabbed the bin and set it on the floor. Kuroko sighed and let himself sink to the floorboards where he popped the top off the container and shifted the contents around. He noticed an immersion of different styles and plucked a handsome navy polo from the congealed mass. He pinned the article against wide shoulders and was pleased that the first selection was the right size. Kagami scrambled to collect the shirt as he released it and bent to seal the bin.

“It’s blue,” came a bland statement.

He aborted the center aisle, hooking around to the first where more shelves supported similar bins. His eyes zigzagged the collection, finger tracing the labels.

“Problem?” he asked.

His boots made no sound as he slid the floorboards to the end of the row and turned to another against the shed’s wall.

“It’s fucking blue.”

An elated noise escaped him as he spotted the desired tote, no covering concealing the holdings. He tipped it from its spot on the rack and was mindful to reduce the clattering as he sifted through, fondling gobs of plastic, metal, and polyester entwined with twisting cords.

“Conversation starter,” he said.

“I’m not wearing this.”

He tucked two devices to his chest, shoved the bin back, and returned to the center aisle where Kagami stood obstinately cross-armed, chest bare and the offending shirt clutched in his hand. The distasteful sneer faded as the man noted what heclutched. A silent tip of his head posed the question.

He untangled one of the objects and held it into view. An adhesive strap and a fishhook-shaped earpiece tacked together by a set of wires. Two coin-sized vocal amplifiers on the neckpiece conveyed speech clearly when engaged against the throat. The receiver, a rectangular contraption a tad smaller than a blackboard eraser, opened the channel for communication to preset
frequencies. A bit old-fashioned for his liking but the Ice was notorious for their orthodox approach to modern technologies. It’d have to make do.

“I’m not letting you traipse the temple without a reliable guide.” He wiggled the radio. “These have a distance of about two miles, given they’ve been maintained properly.”

Kagami’s amused stare was priceless and he snorted. “Damn, you guys need to get out of the Stone Age.”

“My people hallmarked these advancements, thank you.”

The man paused and grabbed for his nape. “Maybe you should have been the hair dye scapegoat.”

“You mean dark horse.” He tossed one of the two radios and the prince fumbled to catch it. “The shirt, Kagami-kun.”

Kagami huffed an aggravated sigh that reminded Kuroko of an irate feline; ears pinned, eyes narrowed, and tail thumping in warning. The man turned to the nearest shelf and deposited the radio. In jerking motions befitting a child’s tantrum, the article was shaken out and looped around his neck.

From his vantage point, Kuroko acknowledged a twisting jagged scar racing down Kagami’s back. The scar from Aomine. His brows sloped as he outlined the lightning tree from top to bottom, tracing the frazzled coils rolling under sculpted muscles. A navy curtain obstructed view and he found the prince looking directly at him.

They were silent, reading the other’s expression for a moment. Kagami broke eye contact by giving the shirt a few tugs to straighten stubborn wrinkles and folds.

The words came unbidden and dripped like acid on his tongue. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Kagami grabbed the radio and curled the earpiece into place, turning to face him. “He isn’t.”

A stab of mediation was swallowed and Kuroko went to work equipping his own radio. He wouldn’t speak vicariously of Aomine. And he had to remind himself that, yes, Aomine wouldn’t regret exchanging blow-for-blow. Their entire association was governed on that principle. But as he glanced across the aisle at Kagami clipping the receiver to his waist, he remembered the tacit message shared between them just a moment ago.

Do not tell Aomine.

Attaching the equipment successfully, he adjusted his own ensemble before addressing the prince. “Stick around here for at least ten minutes. It should take me about that long to enter the fifth temple. After that, it’s up to you to find Aomine-kun. Where you take him once you’re clear of the premises is your discretion.”

He stepped to the wide mouth of the shed’s doorway before Kagami’s voice stopped him.

“What am I supposed to do about these?” he asked, gesturing to his eyes.

Kuroko’s lips puckered thoughtfully as he threw a cursory sweep across an assortment of bins on the shed’s right wall. “We got hats.”

The prince scowled and waved dismissively. “Never mind. I’ll just keep my head low.”
“Start with the barracks first.” He tapped the neckpiece of his radio, overshadowed by the high-voltage collar awarded by the Dan thirty-four years ago as insurance against any sudden violent urges. “I’ll dial in additional places before I confront Imayoshi.”

Kagami nodded.

“Please behave yourself, Kagami-kun.”

“I get it, already,” the man snapped. “Just go.”

* * *

Kuroko approached the entryway of the fifth temple. He wove through a small clutch of temple residents and noted that more were filing from the doublewide doors. Considering the waning daylight he surmised that the central deck and adjoining catwalks would soon be teeming with Apparitions. To intercept the latest updates of Lord Akashi’s advancement, no doubt. A minor concern at the moment.

He slid inside, doors held ajar for more passersby exiting the temple. People lingered as he coursed the halls toward his destination. The closer he drew to the stairwell that would lead him to the Dan’s office, the more resolute he felt. His inhibitions curbed and the nearly forgotten thrill of the hunt filled him. Vigor fueled his stride as the staircase came into view.

The consequences that would befall him should he fail were inconsequential. Because he would not fail. Imayoshi was a virus that he planned to erase from Aomine’s life. Permanently.

A hand snagged his arm. Impulse guided him as he spun and shoved the threat into the wall, arm pressuring the aggressor’s windpipe.

Frightened pink eyes stared back.

Momoi.

He reared back, chest slammed with a sudden breath. The shock faded just as quickly from her face.

She still gripped his arm, at the elbow.

“Momoi-san, I’m so sorry,” he said, battling to still his erratic heart.

The immediate lack of a reaction daunted him and she appeared to be recalibrating the situation. How could he have been so lost in thought that he had been misdirected?

Momoi dismissed his apology and lifted from the wall, pulling him as she bound the opposite direction of the Dan’s office.

“Later, Tetsu-kun.” Distress punctuated the words and he passed a fleeting glance to the retreating stairwell.

After retracing two corners, depositing them in an empty softly-lit hallway identical to nearly all other passages in this temple, Momoi led them to a door. A copper placard fastened to the center read Washroom. What business did she have here? And why was he involved?
She pushed inside, tugged him in, and engaged the lock.

Being that she hadn’t, he inspected the interior. A ceramic trough fed water by three faucets sat below a mirror that screened the alcove. Recessed lighting beamed soft cones into a dozed slotted urinal stalls. Zigzagging sepia tiles chased down the aisle, hooking dramatically to pursue the communal showers and another row of urinals. The sallow tiles were unobstructed by visitors and the facilities offered no indication of use. Whatever she had to share with him was critical if she hadn’t thought to check her surroundings first. But that the washroom was her chosen location told him privacy was imperative. Which meant what was coming was not good.

She hadn’t so much as hinted the purpose of her diversion and he hadn’t much time to indulge distractions.

“Momoi-san, what is this about?”

“I had a chat with the Dan,” she said.

He couldn’t contain his disappointment.

“I know, I know. But after he ejected me, I suspected he was expecting company, so I lingered and listened.”

He waited.

“We were right, Tetsu-kun.” Despite their seclusion, she kept her voice near a whisper. “The Dan is up to something. It wasn’t but a few minutes after I’d been dismissed that I heard him speaking with another man. No one else had entered the corridor beforehand.”

He digested the implication and his eyes fell to the tiles scaling the floor.

When he looked to her again, he saw she reciprocated the conclusion.

He was confident of the stranger’s identity but wanted to hear it. “Did you catch his name?”

“Susa.” She paused. “Head security adviser of the Lord, Czar, and Kaizer.”

Ire swelled within him. But the revelation did more than justify his imminent plans. It confirmed that there was another player in Imayoshi’s game. Which urged excess caution not just for him, but Kagami as well. Susa was a practiced warrior, imbued with more than a century of tactical skills necessary to operate without notice. A definite problem. Even for Kuroko, a designated phantom among the Apparition world.

He dug under his shirt collar, to Momoi’s noticeable perplexity, and retrieved the earpiece he’d removed shortly after crossing the fourth temple catwalk. The bud was inserted and he tuned the receiver. The channel crackled to life and he pinned the buttons of the neckpiece against his throat as he spoke, “Baka-gami-kun.”

He noted the knotting of her brow and the penetrating squint.

Kagami’s voice seeped into his ear. “Wasn’t aware we decided on codenames, twerp.”

Kuroko smiled, spying the mounting irritation on her face and signaled that it would only be a moment.

“I thought you’d hit a little more below the belt than that.”
“Hard to think on short notice. Had to duck into a storage closet just to receive your tender loving words.” There was a lapse in the feed. “Got anything for me?”

“You’ll love this one.”

“Surprise me.”

“Susa Yoshinori.”

Silence again.

“Tell me I’m not stalking around this temple with the threat of Susa Yoshinori popping in on me a sure thing.”

He tipped his head contemplatively. “I wouldn’t say a sure thing.”

“Damn it, Kuroko.” A burst of frustration pounded his eardrum. “What the fuck am I supposed to do now?”

“The chance is narrow,” Momoi interjected and he stared inquisitively.

The suppliance was unexpected. But he considered she was tired of being ignored.

He hadn’t realized the channel remained active until Kagami’s voice broke him of his stupor.

“Who is that?”

Gauging her expression, he said, “No one you’d want to meet.”

The faint scowl on her fine lips showed she agreed.

“While I have you then.” The words came hushed. “The barracks are clean and I’ll be making my way to the central deck. Point me somewhere.”

Momoi cut in before he could answer. “What is the Fire prince doing here?” No alarm disguised her conviction.

He hadn’t felt the need to evade her and he confided that the matter would be contained between them. Yet there was no time to expound everything. So he chose his words carefully.

“Aomine-kun is the heir of the late Kaizer Daichi.”

Her eyes widened a fraction and searched frantically as they fell to the tiles. The dots connected and her gaze shot to meet him. True to form she composed her emotions, only vestiges bleeding into terrified magenta hues.

“The Kaizer. This whole war.” The final word was uttered with finality, “Dai-chan.”

He said nothing but nodded.

She examined him askance. “You were going straight for the Dan’s office. What are you planning?”

Exposing his agenda was synonymous with inviting her interference. Something he did not need. He was done with lying to her but he reasoned that deviation was necessary. If just once more. So he said, “To confirm something. Nothing more.”
“Your reaction before says otherwise,” she retaliated. “No one on a mission of clarity is so clouded
that they mistake friend for enemy.”

Her sagacity was near impeccable and though subjected to her dissection, he couldn’t help but be
amazed.

He thumbed one of the amplifying buttons on his neck and called for Kagami.

A moment later, a response came. “Hard to believe the temple disregards something as
revolutionary as the mop.”

“I apologize. I…” He peered to Momoi, who looked equal parts distraught and impatient. “A
debriefing was in order. Momoi-san is Aomine-kun’s ex-wife.”

Kagami hawed. “You’re right. I wouldn’t want to meet her.”

Almost as if the message had been overheard, she supplied, with a generous dose of bitterness, “In
time, prince.”

The man muttered something in English that sounded lamentable but he did not press.

“Ohk,” the prince continued, “so signing off a future date between my balls and her foot aside,
can I get a heading here? There’s only so much patience I have for tight spaces.”

“Didn’t figure you a claustrophobic.”

“Consider me restless.”

He left the feed open as he consulted with Momoi. “Momoi-san, can you think of any places
Aomine-kun would be right now?”

Despite her prejudice, she dropped her gaze in thought, a finger to her lips. It was difficult for him
to ask for subjectivity but she was his only other friend in the temple and contempt for Kagami
aside, her cooperation may pose the boundary between success and failure.

“Last I saw him he was in the infirmary in the second temple. Where he may have gone after that
could be either the cafeteria on the ground floor of the first temple or the bathhouse nestled behind
the second temple.”

That she doctored her directions for a foreigner to her home pleased him. It also told him she
projected on the assurance that Kagami possessed a means to verify the locations. Which he did.
Before leaving, Sakurai offered a map of the temple’s layout that the prince didn’t hesitate to
accept.

“Sure there’s not a brothel he’s harassing about now?” Kagami jested.

Momoi didn’t appreciate the joviality, if her disdainful look was any indication.

He sighed. “Prostitution and peddling sex is illegal here, Kagami-kun.”

The prince snorted. “No wonder the guy’s so sexually frustrated.”

Momoi’s face contorted into a sneer and he suppressed the urge to shrink. Was the fool genetically
condemned to be obtuse?

“Another time, Kagami-kun.”
“Why don’t I just check his bedroom?”

Kuroko swallowed a groan but not his agitation. A reliable memory would have been gratifying, as well. “Right. Where he’ll be nestled comfortably among the splinters and roof tiles with a breathtaking view of the sunset through the gigantic hole in his ceiling.”

The radio channel was silent for a few seconds before Kagami said, “Sarcasm isn’t cute coming from you.”

Momoi’s interjection spared him the chance to retort. “If it’s Dai-chan he wants to find, he’s better off tracking Imayoshi’s whereabouts instead.”

He passed her a quizzical look and imagined Kagami doing the same.

“There’s a possibility that Dai-chan may be seeking out Imayoshi to explain the excursion to the fort,” she explained. “Contrary to the Dan’s beliefs, Dai-chan isn’t so desperate to accept hollow praise. Any accomplishments he’s made thus far haven’t been appreciated and for the temple to be in a sudden joyous uproar about his supposed actions will only propel him to settle the issue. And if he hasn’t sought the Dan out yet, he will once he discovers his true identity as a…” Hesitation tightened her lips and her eyes slid shut. “Lightning Apparition.”

Her body resigned the stiffness she had been perpetuating since he established contact with Kagami. She shoved a hand through her hair. “This explains everything. His temperament, fondness for storms, embracing humidity.” She looked to Kuroko. “The pain.”

Through the transmission, Kagami muttered, “Won’t have to worry about that anymore. If it’s any consolation.”

He risked a smirk and bobbed his head in her direction.

She understood his cue to continue. “Imayoshi was in his office, on the second floor of the fifth temple, with his accomplice. Few words were exchanged and once it grew quiet, I scampered out before I was caught. Dai-chan is certain to investigate the Dan’s places-of-interest before assuming the office is his best bet. Considering the current situation, Imayoshi would seek meditation. The library and the Water Room are the other places he would most likely be.” She paused. “Kagami-kun.”

The change of address was surprising and he found the volume knob on the receiver, cranking it a few notches to amplify the transmission. The prince responded with similar confusion.

“Present?”

“Cross the central deck from the fourth temple to the second. Search the main repository then investigate the second floor balcony. He reads among the tables there. If that fails, enter the next temple over.”

“What’s with the change of heart?”

Momoi’s brows knit crossly. “Don’t confuse cooperation for clemency.” She closed her eyes, inhaled deep, and breathed out. “I haven’t forgiven what you’ve done to Daiki. But if your involvement saves him from… all of this… and means a chance at restoring his happiness, then I have no choice but to trust you. Find him, take him away from this place, and keep him safe.”

Silence.
Then, “Understood, ma’am.”

The transmission cut out and Kuroko detached the neck- and earpiece, and unclipped the receiver from his belt. The device was handed to Momoi, who received it without question. As he adjusted his skewed collar, he spied concern blossoming behind a veneer of frustration. Should Kagami ingratiate himself among her graces, she would come to learn the prince’s effect on people. An unspoken question hung in the air and, as he prepared himself to part with her, he decided to answer it.

“I don’t know what I’ll be walking into,” he said. “But Kagami-kun needs an active set of eyes if he’s to retrieve Aomine-kun. And yours are among the wisest.”

Her smile cracked the conflicting mask of emotion and he remembered a particular remark about his romantic tendencies from Aomine not but a few days ago. Flattery was hardly appropriate right here, right now, and a tinge of embarrassment broke his eyes from hers.

Until she lifted on her toes and kissed him. Short and sweet, a curious introduction. One that blazed a hot fire through him and froze his limbs.

She pulled back enough to look into his eyes. Her grip on his bicep pulled him back to the present.

“Please, come back,” she said.

A smile came unbidden and he allowed it. “How else am I to recover the radio?”

She bowed her head in concession, unlocked the door, and left.

* * *

Eerie silence hovered through the short hallway standing between Kuroko and the door to the Dan’s office. He’d ascended with utmost care for secrecy and was now knelt at the top step. He hadn’t dared peek around or expose himself yet. His advance would be as swift as it would be sudden. Imayoshi would be allowed no chance to conceal his deception. As he steeled himself, the reminder that the man may be absent flashed across his mind. For the success of his mission he hoped not.

This needed to end.

Plastering his shoulder blades against the wall, he nudged his sight around the corner. Experienced eyes scouted for potential problems. A flicker or twitch of movement. Above the double doors he spotted something. A mutation in the wall’s smooth appearance. He squinted and lowered himself down one riser. Then he understood.

Perched above the molding of the doorway rested a camera. A little rectangle no larger than his palm, with a beady little eyeball that barely captured the surrounding light, and camouflaged to match the wall’s color.. Keyword being barely. To the untrained eye, the little observer would be overlooked.

Imayoshi was digging himself deeper into the container of Kuroko’s hatred. Which before, he would have said, wasn’t that large.
How quickly that had changed.

He fingered a throwing knife from a holster bound to his calf and gripped the hilt between his thumb and index finger. The transition needed to be successive, so as to overwhelm the Dan, should he be ensconced inside. His heart drummed aggressively and he inhaled a deep breath. Exhausting did not quell the beat but did sooth his nerves.

Clutching the edge, he lashed his armed hand around the bend and a shrill ping announced a successful strike. Sparks spit from the impaled lens. Using momentum of the swing, he plunged into the corridor and charged twenty feet to the thick doors. He angled and his shoulder rammed the entryway open. The force hinged the slabs wide, jarring the knobs against the walls.

Imayoshi sat at the tea table adjacent to a large man who exuded a black aura that prickled the hair on his nape. Susa Yoshinori. Shock held their faces for but a few seconds.

“I believed you a responsible man, Kuroko-kun,” the Dan said. “And yet you defy orders.”

He expected Imayoshi to put up a composed front but the unguarded manner in which he addressed him was disconcerting.

Contrary to his training, he shelved the concern.

“You set him up.” Emotion bubbled, leaking into his tone. “To take the fall for killing Hyuuga-san. All for your own personal gain.”

Susa jerked to rise but the Dan motioned that he remain seated. When those narrow eyes met his again he noted the malice swimming within. This was bad.

The Dan cocked his head. “Fancy yourself a chess player, Kuroko-kun?”

He ignored the deflection, anger heating him. “The deception ends here, Imayoshi.”

The Dan’s mouth curled wryly and he stood. Kuroko flinched at the movement but kept tension from freezing his joints. He watched as Imayoshi turned around to one of the two bookshelves hugging the large gilded mirror. An earthy scraping was heard and then an airy thunk as the man rummaged about. Black and white marble figurines clattered against the shelf, some spilling over the edge and falling to the tatami flooring.

“History,” Imayoshi began, tone elevated for what Kuroko surmised was a distraction, “insists that the king is the most powerful person over a sea of people. Courageous, dutiful, honorable.”

His gaze shot to what little of the shelf he could see around the Dan and spotted a black game piece of a man seated upon a throne, hands draped over the cross guard of a cumbersome sword positioned between spread knees. The king.

Imayoshi flicked the figurine away where it ricocheted off the polished bookshelf and met others on the floor.

“Strange, wouldn’t you say?” The shuffling ceased. “The one position considered most valuable in the world, coveted by many, is reduced to the weakest player in the game. And who then assumes the role?”

He didn’t hesitate. “The pawn. Powerful enough to revive lost pieces on its own.”

The Dan threw him a detestable grin that broke his flesh out in goosebumps. “Others may agree.
Yet I personally favor the queen.”

A miniature woman clad with a breast plate and one arm shielded with armor brandishing a stately blade was displayed but the Dan had yet to face him. Perceived as the most potent figure on the board, the queen dominated with long-range linear movements, capable of clear the entire playing field with one move, if the player so chose. Able to advance and retreat. The selection, Kuroko realized, suited the Dan’s personality. Not a figurehead, but a person of recognizable power and the ability to wield it with unpredictable precision.

The Dan commanded himself a master of the game. Yet he overlooked one detail.

So Kuroko decided to remind him. “Still susceptible to a mere pawn.”

A dark chuckle chilled his bones and the Dan finally turned.

“I expected so much more of your loyalty, Kuroko-kun.”

The subtle drag of the man’s thumb darted his gaze to an object cradled in Imayoshi’s hand. Grasped within was an oval device, a red eyeball noticeable beneath the teasing fingertip. An impending presence behind him jolted his attention and he inhaled an unfamiliar, dangerous scent. He lunged forward to distance himself, intent on contending the threat, but a grip on his shirt reeled his back into a sturdy chest. A powerful arm barred his shoulders and another pinned his head and neck steady.

While struggling, a thought grabbed him.

He inspected the tea-table to see Susa was no longer seated.

Dammit.

Imayoshi forced Kuroko’s hand, dividing his focus to allow Susa the opportunity to act.

And he’d been foolish enough to be distracted.

His captor bent close to his ear. “Quite disobedient for a mutt, aren’t you?”

He snapped his head into the man’s cheek and the contact of stone-solid bone rattled his brain. Susa constricted him in a painful embrace and he thrashed to relieve the pressure.

“Put him down already, boss.” The shadow squeezed hard. “He may have broken my cheek.”

Imayoshi snickered at the exaggeration and Kuroko’s whipping head was still, pinned against the wedge of Susa’s muscular arm in a headlock. He witnessed the device the Dan possessed being brought into view and wiggled for his benefit and a stark reality popped his eyes wide. The remote detonator for the high-voltage collar.

He forced the fright from his voice. “Killing your nephew’s parents and then stealing his property. Seems like a dramatic slip of conduct, doesn’t it?”

Susa jostled him for the taunt.

“Aomine never possessed the true remote.” Surprisingly no malevolence claimed the Dan’s face as he spoke. “For all his faults, compassion is by far his largest vulnerability.”

Susa clamped Kuroko’s nape and a well-place kick loosened his frozen knees, dropping him to kneel on the tatami mats. The other hand knotted his hair tight, angling to maintain eye contact.
with his executioner.

“He is simply too kind.”

And Imayoshi pressed the button.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The queen had claimed the pawn.

They left the body, Imayoshi insisting that the next phase of his plan eclipsed disposal. As he secured the office, he hesitated to entertain an alarming possibility.

Chapter Notes

I have no excuses for the absence. Lost a bit of my flow for a while. But that gave me time to attack the rest of the story at my leisure and with the month and a half I’ve been away, I’ve managed to plan the rest of TWCH to my liking. I'll try to stay a chapter or two ahead of my postings to motivate more punctual releases. As always, thank you for your support. It means a lot.

Imayoshi watched as Kuroko had fallen victim to the collar’s effects. His accomplice had received little warning beforehand and shoved the insolent brat to the floor as Imayoshi detonated the current. An explosive scream ripped through the usually reticent shadow. Desperate hands grasped the throat in a pitiful attempt to remove the device. The body plummeted to the tatami, assuming a rigid stiffness that cracked under the rolling waves of convulsions. It only took thirty seconds before Kuroko stopped moving. How disappointing.

Susa knelt to inspect the man’s vitals. A subtle shake of the head told Imayoshi that the muscles were twitching away their last vestiges of energy.

He had wanted to remain for the spectacle. Kuroko’s unsolicited divulgence left him on edge and incensed. Trust the little interloper to throw a cog into his plans. But no longer.

The queen had claimed the pawn.

They left the body, Imayoshi insisting that the next phase of his plan eclipsed disposal. As he secured the office, he hesitated to entertain an alarming possibility. That the little bastard may very well have feigned death for Susa’s benefit. Unlikely, considering Imayoshi vetted the best possible countermeasures to effectively eliminate the unprecedented threat Kuroko posed within the temple. Yet still. Any student of Izuki Shun was one to be cautioned. He dared not voice his suspicions to his associate. Even on the slight chance Kuroko survived the electrocution, he would be incapacitated long enough for Imayoshi’s affair to be concluded. His next move was clear and he turned to Susa who waited expectantly, not a hint of wayward emotion fixing his features.

Imayoshi motioned and they fled the short corridor.

*   *   *
As expected, the third temple was devoid of Apparitions. The milling sea of distraught, apprehensive, and enthused temple residents swayed to the oration of tipped heralds positioned along the central deck, their voices a tumult of indistinct murmuring. Allowing a flawless progression across the catwalks. Susa made the journey with him. Exposure was not a concern. At a distance, a Shadow Apparition could be mistaken for one of the Ice. Dark skin and hair was a homogeneous trait among the two breeds. Granted not many among the Ice Nation rose to his partner’s staggering height but he knew there had been an influx of taller Asiatic Apparitions, of which Aomine and Kagami were examples. Should compromise become an issue, Susa would be consolidated into the fold.

Imayoshi waited until they traversed far enough within the network of hallways that no lingering eyes and ears would intercept them to speak.

“How goes the movement up north?” English, as always, was their chosen vernacular.

They cut across a wide intersection that opened to three passages, choosing the center offering and continuing on. “Nebuya’s outfit should arrive at Casimir Palace by tomorrow morning.”

That pleased him. Overlooking the upset, first instigated by Momoi then Kuroko, he liked that all the pieces to his orchestration were aligning. Two days ago when he’d summoned Aomine, he asked that his envoy detain the little shadow as well. Not to prevent him from following Aomine but to allow the chief to mobilize a contingent of skilled men to invade the Lightning monarchy’s capital. As organized as the kingdom was, the masses became inconsolable when governance slackened. The death of the Kaizer signified instability and civil unrest would pressure the monarchy’s upper echelons to scramble to stabilize the situation. Which Imayoshi had both predicted and planned to capitalize.

Little over fifty feet of polished hardwood were cleared and Imayoshi stopped. The plaster wall spanning to his right was broken by a descending stairway hewn from mountain rock leading into the basement level. Globes of dank light provided by candle sconces sloped down into the darkness. Since the dismemberment of the temple’s army, the subterranean space had served little purpose apart from cold storage for the next temple over. But more than that lay below.

Imayoshi faced Susa. “Sniff out Nebuya topside and then both of you report back. We’ve a few things to discuss before we act.”

Though the combat chief had amassed an impressive cell of troops, the man had been ordered to remain on the premises to draw suspicion away from Imayoshi’s scheming. And, as always, the chief had been amiable to participate in the venture. It wasn’t patriotism, but ambition and Imayoshi liked that about the brute.

Susa nodded and disappeared.

Imayoshi descended into the basement.

Wide passages veined the rock and he navigated the flexuous avenues by memory alone. Hardly a labyrinth but sophisticated enough to perturb trespassers. For the sake of conserving the land, only a dozen or so passages had been carved, each one connected to a now empty yawning hole. All save for one. His feet led him to a steel door at the end of a thin corridor that possessed a single offshoot. No title announced this room which was how he liked it. After all, only Apparitions who sought the Water Room had any business here. No one without purpose traipsed
the cellar.

He entered and was washed with a gust of damp air. Rivulets of water trickled down the craggily rock walls and the ticking droplets from blunt stalactite teeth above invited the soothing effect of the artificial haven upon him.

Doubt flushed from his mind. Susa and Nebuya haven’t failed him yet. Neither had Aomine. And they had all performed precisely as instructed. They, too, would reap the benefits of what was about to unfold in the coming hours. Let Akashi ravage the lesser villages on a flimsy diplomatic mission of vengeance. More than just the Ice Nation would be affected by the collapse of the Lightning monarchy. The stranglehold of every piece of legislature that restricted the Ice from subsisting in their homeland would be annulled. Current relationships would be dissolved, negotiations convened to settle border disputes, and new alliances forged.

Imayoshi imagined himself no hero. Nor savior.

No. He was assuming the responsibility that so many of his kind had refused to shoulder. Reversing the incurred damage to culture, nationhood, economy, and sociality.

He would end the pacifism that has unbalanced the Apparition world.

Spearheading the mission as one of millions of prisoners facing their prosecutor.

And this time, the underdog would prevail.

As he sat on the undulating marble floor, he recalled Momoi’s challenge. His most valuable piece was unaccounted for. But he needn’t worry. Aomine would not present himself as an obstacle and though he may not appreciate the unwarranted admiration that would come his way, Imayoshi was confident that his nephew would submit to his coercion.

As Momoi provided earlier, like he always does.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The incident in the bathhouse was still fresh in Aomine's mind. A faint tingle danced through his fingertips and he curbed his festering rage. The revelation explained so many unanswered questions. All except one.

Why?

Chapter Notes

A short chapter this time. But it's all downhill from here, so buckle your sphincters. Thanks for your continued support. I hope you continue to enjoy my little novel.

Aomine strolled across the span of the circus deck, his speed stifled by the floating crowd. The boasting heralds’ dictation, a monotonous echo rippling from the central deck, buffeted his ears in a weak bass. Crossing that would be impossible. The congealing swarm of bodies clogged the massive plaza, orbiting the vivacious orators. The circus deck wrapped around the temple’s epicenter and threaded through the catwalks like a spider’s web to connect the complex together. The attention garnered by recent developments maximized attendance capacity and several thousand Apparitions lined the railings of the circus deck awaiting enlightenment.

He passed the first temple access, continuing on to where the path angled to the fifth temple catwalk. The congregation grew thicker as he neared and he didn’t hesitate to elbow and shoulder aside bystanders and dissolved back into the mass before he could be recognized.

The incident in the bathhouse was still fresh in his mind. A faint tingle danced through his fingertips and he curbed his festering rage. The revelation explained so many unanswered questions. All except one.

Why?

For a century, Aomine had lived a lie. An intricate fallacy that obliterated his chances at a functional life. Had Imayoshi’s admonitions all these years been sincere or duplicitous, as Kagami claimed?

He wasn’t sure what to believe.

But he thought back to a time when Kagami had been in his position. And what the prince had said.

*I never should have trusted you.*

Had he misjudged his uncle’s infallibility?

The conflict thrummed through his brain and pain blossomed behind his eyes. He halted
and pinched his nose with a groan.

If Imayoshi lied about Aomine’s identity, what else had the man forged?

“Aomine, hey.”

The rough baritone broke his spiraling introspection and he looked ahead. Jogging across the circus deck from the direction of the fifth temple came Nebuya Eikichi. If the hooked grin and competitive glaze to the man’s narrow eyes were any indication, Aomine could only assume the chief’s approach would result in one of many proposals for physical contest. Which he wasn’t eager to entertain. In fact the interruption spiked his temper and he shoved his curled hands into his pockets to quell any wayward sparks that may fly from fielding this idiot’s whims.

The chief neared and Aomine fashioned a mask of irritation.

“In a bit of a rush, aren’t you?” He jerked his head to the commotion beyond. “Not eager to meet your endearing fans?”

Aomine remembered what Satsuki had said about the public’s mixed opinion of him. *You’re either a knight or a harbinger.* “Depends on who you ask, doesn’t it? I don’t have time to dodge praise and slander. I need to see Imayoshi. Whatever nonsense rematch you’re angling for is gonna have to wait.”

He walked on and passed Nebuya.

“He’s out of the office.”

He stopped, glancing over his shoulder. Electric heat coated his hidden fingers and he relaxed the tension, recalling his experiment in the baths.

“Where the hell is he, then?” he asked.

“Water Room, last I heard. I was actually on my way to see him.”

Perfect.

He faced Nebuya and tipped his chin up. “Mind if I tag along?”

The chief parried his request with raised hands. “No can do.”

Aomine’s jaw tightened, eyes crinkling in an undisguised sneer.

“Don’t get shitty. Family doesn’t retain privilege over appointment, Aomine. I was summoned, you weren’t.”

He wasn’t about to let Nebuya stand between he and Imayoshi. From the central deck, a swirl of bungled reactions sounded, reaching the attendees of the circus deck. Concerned murmurs floated around him, Apparitions keeping their disclosures controlled.

He couldn’t risk losing composure, so he decided to appeal to the bond formed between himself and the combat chief.

“You could let me cut in line,” he said.

Nebuya didn’t receive the bait, his mouth bowed hard and brows firm in their rejection. Thick arms crossed a burly chest, cementing the denial and Aomine’s suppressed emotions
threatened to boil over.

“We aren’t academy squirts anymore. I’ll have him pencil you in.”

An apathetic shrug was added and the chief turned away, walking to meet with Imayoshi in the one place within the complex Aomine had never located. There was never a need. What use did an inviolate have to meditate within an Apparition mecca?

He couldn’t allow Nebuya to leave. He grabbed the man’s shoulder, muscles taut and powerful under his hand, and wrenched him around. Consternation swam through the chief’s face.

Aomine glared, unaffected, and said, “I wasn’t asking.”

The demand hung stiff in the air between them. Nebuya’s hesitation further stirred his aggravation.

He stared into unflinching eyes, pressing the man’s shoulder with a squeeze designed to motivate a response. Stressed beyond the brink of control, as he’d never been so taxed, a jagged finger of lightning skittered across his knuckles.

For a moment he wondered if the flicker had been noticed in the way Nebuya canted his head in appraisal. No resignation clouded his face or body as he swiped away Aomine’s hand like a fleck of dust. He jerked a thumb at the massive hazy silhouette of the distant third temple, identified by its four stacked layers.

“Follow me.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

“I know I didn’t raise you to be so disrespectful, Aomine.”

He noted the clipped tone and fought a rising apprehension.

“Perhaps that shadow whelp Kuroko has contaminated you, after all.”

“No,” the killer said. “Attitude is hereditary.”

Aomine’s composure snapped and spindles of lightning billowed from his fists, the flesh consumed by the brilliant, pulsing current.

“So is this.”

Chapter Notes

Increased work hours is great for money, but poor for motivation. Words, like time, have been hard to come by. But I've tweaked this to death and hope it's satisfactory.

Also a note, I labeled the Ice Temple because continuing to call it "temple" when there are more then just one is painful. The Fire Castle has also been given a name. (because saying the castle repeatedly wears me out.)

I'm surprised there are some of you still hanging onto this dried out teat. Thank you for your continued interest nonetheless. u o u

Upon approaching the mouth of the fourth temple catwalk, Kagami was hit by the barrage of roaring voices from the decks. He stopped to marvel at the scene ahead. By far the largest amalgamation of Apparitions he’d ever witnessed in one location. A churning mass of black heads swirled with apprehension. He took a moment to appreciate the chaos. Kuroko’s impromptu disguise for him may merit some usefulness after all. A clutch of what Kagami assumed were day laborers, their bodies draped in muted earthy colors, drew near and he moved aside to allow them passage.

His gaze on the retreating group lifted, caught in the impending splendor of the Ice Apparition capital, Goryokaku. A denotation he had heard before precisely translating to five-sided fortification. He had never toured the massive structure; either here or in Hokkaido, where the infamous fortress stood to thwart the possibility of northern invaders. Around him loomed five impressive guardian towers, stacked three to five levels tall and grand in their construction. For a virgin visit, he was impressed.

Voices droned on monotonously from the central deck. He loitered at the railing of the fourth temple plaza, a triangular expanse dotted with benches and unlit lanterns connected to other
temples by three accessways. He culled Momoi’s earlier instructions from his memory. The library was located in the second temple. Looking out among the distant structures, he realized that other than a variation in height, there was no numeration distinguishing one temple from another. Silently he mused that there must have been some twisted hazing ritual for young Apparitions to navigate the structure blindfolded.

He reached to the small of his back and dug through the pouch clipped to his belt. His fingers caressed one of the dozen tripwires he’d dismantled from the forest beyond the fifth temple little more than a week ago. He probed, finding a crinkled edge of paper and slowly wiggled the folded sheet free. Kagami cast a furtive glance across the complex as he unfurled the page.

Sakurai’s rushed handwriting tagged the landmarks and broke the hypnotizing symmetry of the temples with numerated labels. Kagami oriented his position on the map, remembering the fifth point of Goryokaku angled south. There were three avenues he could use to reach the second temple, which he spotted opposite the fourth. What had Momoi advised before? Cross the central deck from the fourth temple to the second. He looked to the congested epicenter and scoffed.

No way was he getting through that.

The schematic advertised the circus decks, a path belting the center and interconnecting with the catwalks. He scouted the attendance and noted that, despite the overcrowding, more Apparitions continued to flock to the assembly. Leaving the surrounding accessways viable alternatives. The sheet was returned to the pouch and he trotted down the fourth temple catwalk.

* * *
Fifteen minutes later, he entered the second temple. The tantalizing aroma of grilling meat tickled his nose. His stomach gurgled expectantly. He hadn’t eaten since yesterday evening and with all that had happened, grabbing a quick bite had easily slipped his mind. Palming his belly, he sidled from the entryway and took stock of his surroundings. To the left was the kitchen, its service bar lined with steaming orders of savory platters of fish and vegetables awaiting pick-up. Few patrons crowded the four columns that lifted the second story balcony Momoi had mentioned. A wide stairwell ahead ascended to the second level. The dining hall, partitioned from the entryway by a waist-high wall lay immediately to his right. Beneath the gleam of clerestory windows and chandeliers, tables seated up to two hundred diners. More half-walls cordoned the eatery from further reaches. Conversation was a hollow murmur, much like the central deck.

Search the main repository then investigate the second floor balcony.

Doing the reverse couldn’t hurt.

Kagami climbed the risers of the grand staircase, hand gliding the banister. Voices from below grew softer as he hooked left at the top where ascending and descending stairwells met at an expansive landing. The railing hemmed a narrow walk that he now crossed, opening this portion of the second floor to the first. He assumed a slower gait, eyes feigning the search for a familiar face. He stopped beside a reception desk operated by a lone woman and bounced his gaze around the room. Tea-tables nestled between three aisles of bookshelves offered leisure reading to Apparitions seated upon cushions and pillows of varying design strewn about the parquet flooring. Cedarwood hung heavy in the air from incense burners. Armchairs and loveseats dotted along one wall allowed privacy among meticulous floral arrangements. Soft halos of light pooled from brass chandeliers. Kagami found the clash of culture to be strangely homey. Much like the interior of his bedchamber in Hiromasa Castle.

Chatter reeled his gaze to the balcony tables fifteen feet to his left. A dozen people conversed, their meals sampled between responses. What he wouldn’t give for a bowl of gyudon. Promising himself that reward once this farce was over, he teetered and combed the tables. Three patrons faced away but from their slender shapes and manicured appearance, he decided none were Imayoshi.

He backtracked to the landing. A banister dropped down between a pair of ascending stairs. Below, Kagami noted rows of tables and chairs and a mottled wall of books beneath a hovering chandelier. The main repository? He descended, affirmed the discovery, and reassumed the role of the associate-seeker. He ambled across the span, planting his hands in his pockets to secure the innocent disguise. Tipping his head for good measure obstructed any interest of the women posted at the reception center. Bookshelves swallowed the walls, broken by scones and potted plants. Rows of tables and chairs stood uniformed, flanking a trio of alabaster columns, the symmetry mirrored beyond a set of bookshelves centering the room. Much more austere than what he observed above. A cozy nook in the far corner, seclusion assured by a half-wall of polished oak and glass, demanded his attention.

Spotting an archway adjacent to the partition, he sauntered toward the exit. He faced the interior as he reached the opening and feigned a look of frustration. When he revolved to inspect the nook, only one person occupied the same upholstered chairs of the second floor extension. A squirrely little man was curled onto the seat, his hair far too short to resemble the Dan’s tamer appearance.

He backed out and rolled around the corner into an unadorned white plaster and timber
hallway. He lengthened his stride. Imayoshi wasn’t in this temple. The passage doglegged and he threaded the course that emptied at the bottom of another grand staircase similar to the one he’d climbed earlier. The dining hall lay twenty feet away. He crossed to the temple doors and returned to the balmy grip of a late overcast afternoon.

The horde hadn’t disbanded from the central or circus decks but the shouting dictations had ceased. Which meant the heralds’ broadcast had concluded and they’d departed, leaving Kagami little time before the temples were teeming with Apparitions once again. Ones that may penetrate his cover and jeopardize his mission.

He thought back to the schematic of Goryokaku once again, remembering exterior conduits connecting the plazas. His next destination loomed three thousand feet away and somewhere within lay the Water Room. Possibly Imayoshi. Maybe even Aomine. He jogged to the catwalk tacking temple two to three. No Apparitions loitered along the railings and he accelerated, racing the hardwood. Moist air wrapped his arms and legs in a languid embrace. He hated humidity and sucked quick breaths to silence the strain. The exertion stressed the Lichtenberg figure marring his back and he couldn’t help wincing at the prickle of pain popping with each extended step.

He continued beyond the junction.

There’d been no sign of Imayoshi so far. Aomine nor, to his immense gratitude, Susa, either.

He reached the third temple plaza and ran for the temple doors.

—

Aomine froze upon entering the Water Room. Crossing the circus deck and third temple catwalk had taken ten minutes and negotiating the temple halls and underground passages a fraction less. There was something to be said for long-legged folks and brisk paces and he’d been pleased with the chief’s cooperation. Few obstacles had stood in their way apart from a handful of Apparitions clogging the decks to gossip about the developments superseding Hyuuga’s assassination. A problem he would attend to later.

An even larger problem commanded his attention.

Standing just three meters inside, looking his way, were Imayoshi and another man. Tall with unreadable eyes and sporting a fitting black leather uniform that revealed only the flesh of his hands, neck, and face. He recognized the features immediately.

Hyuuga’s killer.

The feelings he worked hard to slake on the trip down to the basement spiked with renewed vengeance.

This son of a bitch framed him.

He lunged for the bastard but a firm hold from the chief stopped his advance.

“You motherfucker,” he spat to the intruder.
A smug smirk was given. “That’s no way to say thank you.”

The use of Japanese startled him. Back in the fort, when Aomine had eavesdropped on the discourse between this man and the Kaizer, English had been spoken. Meaning the shadow knew Aomine was nearby and communicated in an imperceptible way to elude him. As if Aomine needed more of a reason to eliminate this pest.

“Your officiousness is unappreciated, spook.”

The man raised his hands in mock insult. “Whoa, there’s no need for name-calling.” He chuckled and crossed his arms. “Lighten up. You’re walking away from this with all the glory, pal.”

Aomine jerked against Nebuya’s grip, resenting the jab to his capabilities.

“I don’t need your goddamn handouts.”

A pair of hands clapped, their sharp sound bouncing off the moist rocks. Imayoshi stepped forward and positioned himself in front of the assassin. Looking into those calculating eyes brought a swarm of muddled emotions to surface that he fought to subjugate. This was the showdown Aomine wanted. But was he really prepared to hear the truth, told in that sickeningly detached way the Dan addressed even the most chaotic situations? The interruption abated his temper and, as his posture slackened, the chief relaxed but maintained a barely-there grasp on Aomine’s arm.

“It’s unlike you to barge into a meeting unannounced, Aomine.” He hated the softness in his uncle’s voice, like a father scolding a child awake past curfew. “Is there something you need?”

He told himself not to rise to any suspected coaxing and reined himself in, steadying his voice as he said, “What happened to family doesn’t lie to each other?”

He ignored the shadow’s unimpressed snort and watched the man turn and walk a few feet to a chunky stone column. The trunk stretched from the floor, craggily rock fanning to connect with the ceiling. The man spun to face them—arms still crossed—and dropped a shoulder to the bulging pillar. No water leaked from that side, which irritated Aomine.

Imayoshi’s head tilted, studying him with concern. “I don’t follow. Did the incident at the fort impair your judgment?”

Aomine took his eyes off the assassin and snorted. “You mean that bullshit farce I had to endure?”

The retort knotted the Dan’s brow and he tipped his chin haughtily.

Not a reaction he was accustomed to.

Which made him uneasy.

“I know I didn’t raise you to be so disrespectful, Aomine.”

He noted the clipped tone and fought a rising apprehension.

Imayoshi stroked his chin, gaze to the floor. “Perhaps that shadow whelp Kuroko has contaminated you, after all.”
The long-appeased tingling in his fingers exploded, spearing an ache through the tense muscles of his hands.

“No,” the killer said. “Attitude is hereditary.”

Aomine’s composure snapped and spindles of lightning billowed from his fists, the flesh consumed by the brilliant, pulsing current.

“So is this,” he yelled, venting frustrated breaths he’d held for far too long.

Imayoshi’s surprise showed which only angered him further. His comrade’s lack of a reaction exacerbated the feeling.

So, Kagami wasn’t wrong.

This man. No, this traitor…

“Explain this, Imayoshi.” He hated that his voice cracked but he needed this.

To hear the words he’d been dreading since he’d discovered his ability in the bath house.

The Dan’s face hardened, all emotion sucked away behind a vindictive mask. His uncle’s face tipped down to the marble floor.

The hesitation intensified the coiling maelstrom around his hands.

“Fucking answer me,” he shouted, defeat resonating.

Imayoshi removed his glasses with a sigh and swiped a sleeve-covered thumb across the lenses.

It wasn’t the progress he wanted, but he waited. Hopeful that—for once—he would not be jerked around.

A chill stroked his spine when that silvery voice finally sounded.

“First your parents”—the spectacles were replanted—“then Kuroko.” Cold black eyes looked back, devoid of shame. “Now you.”

The words rattled through him as he dissected their implication. Coupled with the ugly feeling sinking his gut and the inauspicious glint to the Dan’s unmoving stare. What did he mean? The last time he had seen Tetsu was yesterday morning on the hunter’s grounds before he’d been summoned away by Imayoshi’s emissary. The incident at the fort had left his memories irritatingly scattered. All he remembered was lying beneath Kagami in the middle of the Russian wilderness and then waking in the second temple infirmary with Satsuki’s hand cradling his. Nothing existed in between. He suddenly recalled the emotional exchange with Satsuki and what his ex-wife had said when he inquired Tetsu’s whereabouts.

“He’s on assignment. No details were given. You know how the Dan is. Even then he knew it was a lie. A rebuke for his own misgivings. If Tetsu discovered the conspiracy, then the assignment Satsuki hinted to…”

First your parents. Then Kuroko. Now you.

His lungs spent air in tandem with his hammering heart. His uncle and Hyuuga’s killer looked on unabashed as the dots started to connect in Aomine’s brain. The purplish-white flickers around his hands sputtered, the light becoming confused by the fumbling emotions within him battling for
supremacy. But he only needed one in this moment.

The one Imayoshi nearly stole away from him.

He lurched forward, fist primed for attack.

Imayoshi did not budge. “Nebuya.”

Aomine hadn’t registered the summons until the chief’s hand clamped viciously around his bicep. The brute swiftly twisted the arm of his recently healed shoulder behind his back, hinged his knees loose, and knocked him flat to the coarse marble. He struggled, thrashing against the familiar weight pressing his hips and ribs into the uneven floor. The bolts swallowing his hands reduced to tendrils, evaporating in a matter of seconds.

He reared back his unconfined arm in an attempt to dislodge Nebuya with a well-planted elbow to the temple. But the chief acted quickly, capturing and wrenching the appendage into submission tight against his spine. Both of his wrists were easily secured in the chief’s powerful grasp. Aomine felt the painful grind of rock spread through his pelvis as his assailant leaned close.

He tilted his gaze over his shoulder to meet a brazen grin.

“What have I told you about cooling down?”
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Aomine realized something that he’d never questioned.

His parent’s names.

“You never did tell me their names,” he said.

“And why do you think that is?”

Chapter Notes

I don’t know if it’s some lunar influence, lack of sunlight, or the influx or work I’ve been assigned, but I have been practically brain dead for the last few weeks and it is /agonizing/. So difficult to cull my creative energies for longer than a few hours to hammer out more chapters. If I could be paid for sleeping and staring listlessly out car windows, I would be rich, lol

Though I have found the time to brainstorm an entirely separate fic idea that I’ve been fussing over in my downtime. Where as this fic was a simple substitution of my own idea, the one I’m drafting came from a simple (yet stupid) headcanon after a few spectacular SnK high school AUs.

I’m rambling. At any rate, I hope you continue to enjoy TWCH. And thank you for your invaluable support. (Who else is pumped for January 2015?!) 

Aomine writhed under the grunt of the chief’s force. The growing aches where his body ground against the angular floor went ignored as he vied for freedom. Nebuya’s grip on his wrists allowed him to do little more than rock his shoulders and kick. A rough jerk scraped his patched head wound on the marble. His efforts instigated the chief into pinning his skull to the stone and Aomine spat degrading slurs that he knew possessed little effect. Neither on the traitor nor him.

The scuff of leather soles alerted him to Imayoshi’s approach. The Dan touched the chief’s hand exfoliating his face with the floor and Nebuya lifted it away. All ninety-four kilos remained stapled across the small of his back.

He tamed his rapid breaths, hearing the retreating shuffle of feet among the undisturbed tapping of water from the stalactites above. He tested lifting a shoulder and was surprised that the brute allowed the adjustment. Nebuya’s weight shifted enough to one side for Aomine to cock out a bent leg for the support necessary to face his persecutor, the limbs arranged like the number four. The situation shot pain across his pelvis and the bite of his belt buckle into his burdened hip was distracting. But he understood that this was the only reprieve he was getting. His mind seared with rage, questions rocketing throughout but unable to make it past his clenched jaw. As he craned his head to attend to Imayoshi, he leveled with himself. Tetsu wouldn’t have been so hastily eliminated. The disappearance would not go unnoticed and if Imayoshi hoped to maintain Aomine’s cooperation, it was wiser to confine the shadow as leverage.
It certainly wasn’t beyond the Dan’s character.

If that even was his uncle’s true skin.

He spotted Imayoshi standing at a distance that accommodated his limited mobility. The extended courtesy tasted exceptionally bitter.

No emotion conveyed from the Dan’s black eyes.

Eyes that had once told him to mind his manners. To tread safely. To confide all to him.

And now?

“What did you do?” he asked, voice scruffy from the exertion.

He wasn’t certain if the question applied to his parents, Tetsu, or both.

Imayoshi tucked his hands behind his back and began pacing. “There’s a saying that I’ve come across in my readings as a youth. I never gave it much thought and always believed it to be cynical and jaded.” He wondered about the sudden lesson but bargained with himself to sustain it. “Trust without cynicism is hollow. So black and white. Not at all like our nation, wouldn’t you say?”

He waited for the point to be made.

“When people trust one another without reservation,” his uncle continued, “they set themselves up for disappointment. They get taken advantage of because of their intrinsic charity.” Imayoshi halted and faced him, and a knot coiled in his gut. “They become too attached to the misconception that those they trust, without question, are above reproach. That there will be no misgivings. That they will not be manipulated.”

He detected what had not been said. Like I manipulated you.

His throat ached from the strain of stretching to observe the Dan but there was little he could do to soothe it.

“You’re pathetically naïve, Aomine.”

He cringed, unable to completely mask the hurt.

“Not unlike your parents,” Imayoshi added.

“Whom you hardly spoke of.” The words came hoarse, both from the ache and the gnawing emotion within him.

Imayoshi shrugged, hands flapping at his sides with indifference. “You never asked. Nor did you investigate on your own. Not that I ever gave you enough incentive to. Inconsequential, as they were.”

He didn’t like the inflection.

Then he realized something that he’d never questioned.

His parent’s names.

He tried to relieve the numbness swathing his abused hip but Nebuya did not yield.
“You never did tell me their names,” he said.

“And why do you think that is?”

The asperity slapped him hard. Was withholding his parents’ identities really so essential? Somehow it had been. He recalled that, from the sparse details offered in the past, his father was employed by the government and his mother had been a recalcitrant priestess. Both merely weeds among the flowerbed. What was there to hide about supposedly ordinary people?

When he looked into Imayoshi’s calloused gaze he understood.

He dared to ask, though not fully prepared for the answer, “Who were they?”

The Dan’s stony face submitted to an affectionate smile. “There are still times when I forget how scholastically inept you were.”

He absorbed the assault and yelled, “Answer me.”

Imayoshi’s features loosened, maintaining an irritating detachment.

“Imayoshi Nori and Aomine Daichi.”

The names ricocheted through his brain. Unfamiliar, mysterious, yet captivating. And for the last century completely unobtainable.

Warmth flushed his chest as he noted his father’s name.

Aomine Daichi.

Had that been the source of his own name?

Imayoshi’s voice pulled him back and he observed uncharacteristically crossed arms.

“You’re much like your father. Arrogant, independent, rebellious.” Acid leaked into his tone, maleficence tightening his brow. “It was disgusting.”

The hatred speared him like a hot poker. He searched the abyss of his uncle’s stare for any betrayal of admission. Not a twitch disturbed the frozen stillness.

Imayoshi seemed to sense the dissection and angled his attention to his accomplice still leaning against the rocky column.

A smile broke the firm line sealing the Dan’s innocence.

Then the killer reciprocated, satisfaction splitting his lips.

Aomine’s stomach hollowed, squeezing into his chest and vacuuming the air from his lungs.

His eyes found the floor, the muscles of his neck appreciating the relief.

Who was this man standing before him?

Definitely not Imayoshi Shouichi.

The words were pushing up his throat like bile he couldn’t swallow and his forehead met the marble with a gentle tap. “You killed them.”
Apart from the trickling water and dripping stalactites, silence was his answer.

Why wasn’t Imayoshi denying the accusation? Or explaining away the gesture between him and the shadow that had gone uncensored?

Devastation irritated his pulse to thrum painfully in his ears. Incense stressed his lungs into synchronicity.

“Say something, you son of a bitch,” he yelled, bucking against Nebuya’s restraint.

The retaliation was silenced when the chief dropped his chest onto Aomine’s recently healed shoulder. Pain flared for a moment then receded to a dull throb. One of the chief’s hands capped his skull and pushed his face to the marble once again.

His breathing labored hard to accommodate the mighty weight flattened against his back.

“What’ve I told you about that temper, Aomine?” Nebuya asked.

He said nothing, his diaphragm tight against his ribs.

Imayoshi continued, unbothered by the cruelty, “Your mother, as you know, was a priestess of this temple. An Ice Apparition.” He allowed his uncle to speak, remaining still to discourage further punishment. His compliance loosened Nebuya’s grip on his head. “Your father was a Lightning Apparition, as is now evident. Which makes you?”

The condescending tone rankled him and he snapped a glare to illustrate the point.

The chief shoved his forehead to the floor, the slap jarring. His brain throbbed unappreciatively and Aomine wiggled to take the pressure off his nose and brow. His assailant only pushed harder.

Imayoshi approached, stooped, and smacked the offending hand.

Nebuya obeyed the tacit order and Aomine returned his glare.

“You’ve any idea the consequences of your birth?” The Dan asked, distancing himself as he had before.

Aomine jerked his hips below the chief, requesting another adjustment. The exchange a moment ago, between the two backstabbers, clarified that Nebuya’s role was to detain him from becoming a threat. So long as he stayed on the ground, completely immobilized, what obstacle could he pose? Not a severe one. The weight above rolled to the opposite side, allowing Aomine to rotate off his bruised hip. He cocked his other leg out, positioned as he had been earlier. The relief was instant. He reconnected with Imayoshi’s waiting stare.

“Hardly see the necessity to slaughter lower class folk and shove it under the rug for a hundred years,” he replied.

The assassin snapped his fingers, drawing his and the Dan’s attention.

“You forgot the best part about daddy-dearest, boss,” the man said, pointing a playful finger at his benefactor.

Again that smile played across Imayoshi’s mouth. “That’s why I like you, Susa.”

Aomine filed the identity of his next victim away as the now designated man grinned and pocketed his hands, smushing his shoulder to the rock pillar again, clearly enjoying the theater.
Imayoshi faced Aomine again, and said, “Your father was a government official that much is no lie. However his paygrade was much higher.” The Dan let the bait dangle until his mouth bowed impatiently. “Aomine Daichi was the Kaizer preceding Hyuuga, holding office for little over twenty years.”

His blood froze and for a moment his breath stopped.

But Imayoshi did not. “Daichi was a meddlesome spirit, nothing like his father. He had plans to change the state of the Apparition world. Reinstating alliances long dissolved, improving commerce with international trade, establishing a commonality among us all as a singular body. And he infected my sister with his nonsense. A world unified is a tower of logs swaying to the mountain wind. Stacked to such great heights, the integrity of the structure becomes weak, susceptible to toppling. Divided, the wind cannot conquer, merely claw and scrape. But your parents sought to disrupt equilibrium. To integrate the crowns. Condense our race beneath one banner. To heed one voice and abide one constitution. And to do that, they conspired. By creating you.”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Emotions thundered inside him, rebounding violently and leaving him unable to respond, though he opened his mouth to try.

“When I caught wind of their association,” Imayoshi continued, “I attempted to intervene. To dissuade their scheming before any irreversible damage could be done to their reputations. Scandalous enough was their entanglement but they hadn’t considered the ramifications of the cooperation. For years they ignored me, insisting their actions were innocuous. I had even debated leaving the matter alone.” His brows knitted, casting a grim expression that stilled Aomine. “Until I discovered that Nori was pregnant. With you.” He pushed his glasses up, massaging his eyes. “I approached them to issue a final warning to desist and erase all vestiges of their association. Including terminating the fetus.” The frames slid back into place as he planted his knuckles against his chin, eyes distant. “Nori disappeared that night, eight months in-term.”

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Distant cacophonous noise tore Kagami’s gaze from the yawning hole of the third temple basement. When he’d entered the building ten minutes ago he came to the realization that Sakurai had not provided additional maps of the temples’ interiors. The second temple was a stroke of pure luck. Right place at the right time. But where was he to start looking here? His disguise prohibited him from seeking assistance from Goryokaku natives. A hunter, as an Ice Apparition, would know the location of the Water Room. So he hung back—as if waiting for an associate—and brainstormed.

The secretary’s offering came to mind and he juxtaposed his memory of the surrounding geography with the map in his possession. Pulling it out may draw unwarranted interest. The capital was shelved on a ridge, its southernmost point held aloft by a series of crisscrossing timber beams. Three of Goryokaku’s tips pierced the shrub-stubbled rocks. And one of those was the third temple. Which, if he had been visualizing correctly, protruded from the sloping mountainside, giving the south side an unobstructed view of the glen that cupped the hunter’s guild headquarters.

Kagami had found his heading and negotiated a passageway that led him to the right, drawing him closer to the mountain. He skated the hardwood, mindful to remain inconspicuous. Several outlets opened and he decided to hug the outermost wall, unbroken by windows, clearing what felt like
one hundred feet before hooking left. The hallway narrowed to half the width of the course he’d just taken. After two more left turns, he had begun to feel agitated and impatient. But he wouldn’t contact Kuroko. Not yet. Thinking he’d missed the correct turnoff, he scoured the corridor stretching around him. Nothing to the right. Then, to the left, where the path plunged deeper into the temple, he saw something. Darkness peeking from a meekly lit recess. Desperation enticed him to investigate.

Stone risers, carved from the surrounding rock, fell into a cavernous cellar, their descent guided by candle sconces. No sound came from below, as he would have expected from a subterranean space. He had thought about what lay below and his chest tightened. What, or who, would he find down there? Hard to say.

Then came the burst of discordant noise from somewhere nearby. For a moment he focused on the commotion. The slap of tumbling hardwood planks, the screech of an electric saw, and the clatter of clay roof tiles.

While he scanned the hall, as if able to penetrate layers of plaster and timber to find the source, the feeling in his chest descended and clenched his gut. Only one reason for construction in this temple. He told himself to stay on point. To continue the mission.

But he retreated, trotting the way he’d come into the next hall. The noise grew louder.

He scanned the passage. A breath of wind ghosted his arm and reeled his eyes to a frayed tear in the temple’s southern wall.

Well, that was interesting.

How did he miss that?

Giving a cautionary glance around, he approached and the volume of construction exploded. Voices, calling over the sound, reached his ears, though he could interpret nothing. The saw fired to life, shearing through its prey.

The valley fanned out, framed by—what Kagami discovered upon closer inspection—a gaping hold that dissolved, true to Kuroko’s words, the first and second floors. There hadn’t been a massive conflagration, he noted, symptomatic of the baked plaster and charcoal dust streaking the walls. Sheets of plywood tiled the floor, arcing into the next corridor. Black scales peeping below marred what was once polished parquet. The wood groaned when burdened with his weight as he rounded the corner, revealing that there was little to no support beneath. Just how far had the damage extended?

The little shadow’s words floated into his brain.

*I navigated the rubble and found him among the wreckage of roofing and ceiling beams.*

Fragments of singed pine logs lay in piles, shoved against the baseboards to clear a path for the work crew. He edged closer, eyes following a vast network of calked cracks veining the wall on his left, bleeding a good thirty feet. The saw’s assault beyond paused for a moment before gearing up again, muting all conversation. A man stepped from the doorway splinted with steel plating and rods. He flattened himself to the wall and lowered his head as the worker passed. Dust salted the top of his head and he craned to see straight through a grid of planks to the ceiling of the second floor. A pair of workmen, harness and tethered to suspension loops, went to work fastening the supports to begin reconstructing the barrier between the destroyed levels.
He cleared his hair and his gut knotted.

Aomine did this?

He peered around the jamb into the chamber. Larger than he’d expected, the room encompassed a space of twenty-five-by-fifteen feet, the walls colored in a pale green. No portraits or artifacts embellished the sterility. A simple living, much like his own in the smithing village. A bevy of assorted furniture chunks lay demolished in a huddle in the far corner, stacked atop an untouched tea table. Remnants of the master bed, its shattered frame folded over itself, were shoved aside. Broken roof tiles, damaged books and knickknacks, and tattered pillows were strewn about on an abused comforter in what Kagami dubbed the debris corner.

Where he’ll be resting comfortably among the splinters and roof tiles with a breathtaking view of the sunset through the gigantic hold in his ceiling.

More of Kuroko’s earlier divulgence.

Wood clattered to the floor, overwhelming the grind of the saw for a moment. He spooked and whipped his head left where he spotted a workman stooped over a sawhorse. Trimmed lumber littered that half of the room where prepared boards stood stacked against the calked wall and pieces of excess heaping beside the trestle. More workmen labored, affixing the boards to the growing latticework stretching to mend the twenty-foot-high yawn. Kuroko wasn’t kidding. Faint light poured through the breach, alerting Kagami to the fading daylight laden with yesterday’s overcast.

He needed to find Aomine.

He tore away from the scene and retraced his steps before his presence could be questioned. Dread weighed his feet as he trudged on. He massively underplayed the shadow’s account of the damage, not that the shrimp alluded much. Had Aomine really been so desperate, so threatened, that he channeled enough power to obliterate that much? He reached over his shoulder, fingers ghosting the head of the lightning tree tattooing his back. Yes, he had been. And the scar was proof that Kagami had horrendously screwed up yet again.

First when he assaulted the Apparition while impaired.

And again a week later, when he misconstrued Aomine’s presence in the fort and attacked blindly.

He hoped his detour wouldn’t be his third mistake.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

"Didn’t you think I would figure it out some day? That I wouldn’t ask how or why my parents died?"

“No.”

He whipped his head up, locking onto his uncle’s stoic mask.

“Unlike Nori and Daichi, you are far too trusting.”

Chapter Notes

What was intended to be a brief reflection turned into an unexpected hiatus for both TWCH and Incarnate. Work, a military friend on leave, a friend's firstborn, and data collection have kept me swamped and exhausted.

I am still going to finish TWCH. The unexpected hiatus came from preparing a follow-up work to this as well as organizing intricacies for Incarnate. I cannot guarantee when I'll update, but know that I'm working on all my stories feverishly.

So to those who've stuck with me from the start, and those who've come along since, I sincerely thank you for your invaluable support and interest.

Aomine’s breaths became heavy and slow as the missing pieces fell into place. His chest swelled and his gaze fell from his uncle’s blurring face to his knees.

“Your parents couldn’t be bothered to understand the consequences of their union nor the result of their copulation. I had no choice but to confront them. On behalf of my nation.”

His voice rattled as he said, “Why didn’t you remove all evidence then?” When had he started crying? “Didn’t you think I would figure it out some day? That I wouldn’t ask how or why my parents died?”

Silence.

Then, “No.”

He whipped his head up, locking onto his uncle’s stoic mask.

“Unlike Nori and Daichi, you are far too trusting.”

Distress contorted his face.

“It’s fortunate that Kuroko will no longer be able to corrupt you, Aomine.”
Trepidation fired his body into overdrive, gearing the jogging of his heart and lungs into a sprint. No resignation seeped through Imayoshi’s schooled features.

“Where’s Tetsu?”

Neither suspect replied.

“What’d you do to him?” He thrashed, slithering his body to dismantle the chief from his back. Spikes of lightning came unbidden, lashing from the exposed skin of his arms, neck, and head, remaining at attention like hackles on an aggravated dog.

Nebuya’d been caught off guard by the sudden revolt, being sent reeling backward. But the grip on Aomine’s wrists kept him anchored and he rocked forward, clasping his unoccupied hand over the burn he’d revealed three days ago. Aomine screamed when blunt fingers pierced the tender flesh in a crushing grip. He writhed more, which only annoyed his assailant into applying more unbearable pressure.

He twisted and jerked, fueled by pain, fury, and anguish. Tetsu was dead.

Heat boiled in his stomach as Nebuya’s torment persisted.

His best friend was murdered.

And these motherfuckers would pay.

Like a trigger, a bolt of lightning shot for Imayoshi.

Nebuya recoiled from the attack, releasing Aomine’s waist.

The Dan ducked and Susa dropped to the floor as the bolt drilled into the top of the rocky pillar.

His aggressor allowed only a moment of surprise before a chilly hand was upon him. Coolness crept from the chief’s fingers, now clamped around his shoulder, and his palm still cuffing his wrists. He recognized what the man intended and struggled. The ice stretched, coiling around his midsection. Nebuya lifted his hand once Aomine’s were locked by the advancing frost. The fashioned straight jacket encased him from shoulders to waist, engorging to two inches of thickness. The frigid cage stalled all resistance.

Only his sprained shoulder and harassed burn benefited.

Angry prickles washed his hips as the chief adjusted to sit across the back of Aomine’s thighs.

“I told you we should have killed him,” Nebuya told Imayoshi.

“And I told you that was not an option.”

He tipped his gaze up. That irritating shadow had recovered and was now standing beside the Dan, his approach unheard. The attack did not appear to ruffle the assassin leaving Aomine wondering if anything ever did.

“You’ve had your fun with him,” Susa said. “Leave a piece for me.”

“Free agents don’t call the shots, spook,” Nebuya retorted.
The assassin replied in a language that was neither English nor Japanese with a sarcastic edge to his voice.

Imayoshi cut in quickly. “Enough, gentlemen.”

The ice prison did little to calm Aomine’s churning emotions. If it were possible, their intensity would dissolve the binding instantly.

Being jerked around by these bastards was infuriating enough. Irritated by the fact that they spoke as if he did not exist between them.

He was no longer a threat.

“Nebuya,” the Dan started. “When last did you receive a report?”

“An hour ago. They're making progress and estimate arrival by sunrise tomorrow.”

He shelved his dismissal for a moment and focused on the discourse around him. Arrival to where?

“How many dogs you send out?” Aomine didn’t have to look to know who Susa was addressing. *Dogs* were one of many monikers attributed to Nebuya’s contingent.

The chief quipped, “I don’t answer to you.”

He rested his forehead on the stone. What was going on here? What the hell was Imayoshi conspiring to do with the assistance of an outsider and the chief that necessitated the removal of Hyuuga?

He racked his overwhelmed brain for an answer but none came. Only more discomfort.

What would Tetsu do?

The traitors conferred uninterrupted around him, their voices becoming indistinct as his thoughts were consumed.

Memories of his partner came pouring through. Thirty-four years together all snuffed out in one final movement. Yet another reprieve from his gloomy past stolen away from him. A sudden thought came to him and a painful ache stretched his throat tight, tears brimming once again. Six days ago, he and Tetsu had invaded Kagami’s home in the smithing village and overheard Izuki Shun’s divulgence. Listening how Tetsu had once loathed Aomine and plotted an intricate formula to extract maximum suffering before executing him. He had resolved to prostrate himself in apology, never before understanding the fraternal attachment Tetsu formed with those four men he’d killed.

Before long, the little shadow had transitioned from enemy to family.

Now he was gone.

And Aomine would never know if Tetsu had resented him all these years.

Tears streamed his cheeks and a quivering lip was pinned to mute distressed breaths.

“…our attack must be swift.” Imayoshi was saying. “Once we usurp the palace, chaos will descend and your men need to be ready to quell any insurgency.”

“Wouldn’t have sent any that couldn’t.” Nebuya said.
He redirected his focus but kept his head down.

“We will enter together, navigate the storm, and subjugate Hayakawa. Capturing Hyuuga’s second-in-command will inspire the submission we seek.”

Susa’s voice sounded. “Don’t suppose I could just kill him?”

“Less is more my friend.”

The assassin grunted, sounding dissatisfied.

“A new day is dawning and we will seize the power to reshape this world. One way or another.”

Imayoshi’s pernicious intent now became clear.

Overthrowing the Lightning monarchy.

Like hell he would allow that.

The ice casing suppressed rebellion, tightness and frigidity robbing all sensation within the bindings. Luckily he didn’t need his hands for what he was about to do.

Static pricked from his neck, energy gathering unseen below his skin.

He flicked a glance up and spotted Imayoshi nearing, arcing around him as if he were hazardous.

He and Nebuya blocked a direct escape, their bodies between the Dan and the exit.

The power intensified, scratching his muscles, demanding release.

Imayoshi came within ten feet, approaching from the left.

Aomine recalled the sensation in the sauna and fired the shot.

A spindly thread of lightning lunged, trajectory centered on the traitor.

Then, somehow, the bolt careened, veering off and punching the ceiling with a shallow dent.

Did he miscalculate?

Shock registered on Imayoshi’s face and together they traced the projectile’s path.

That close, there was no way he should have missed.

Unless…

His gaze shot to the floor and he saw it.

Black fingers gripped the Dan’s ankles. Legs were frozen in a stance of unexpected retreat, his body leaning away from the threat. Susa steadied his benefactor from behind, an arm planted across the Dan’s back.

So he hadn’t misfired.

Rather Susa contemplated an assault and reacted with disciplined quickness.

Insult flashed across Imayoshi’s face as he and his accomplice recovered.
Then Nebuya was grabbing Aomine’s head and jabbed it to the marble. Pain lanced his brain and his senses flickered, black spots daubing his vision.

He did not lift his head. He couldn’t.

As his world faded, he heard Nebuya being assigned to guard him until the Dan’s business at Casimir Palace was completed.

And then nothing.

Chapter End Notes

It's been so long since I touched this story that I want to slap myself. To my credit, it is a lengthy tale and I've resorted to re-reading it to remember what details I've already expounded and which I've only alluded to. For those who've stayed with me, I cannot even remotely express my gratitude. It took a lot of courage to continue posting this and I hope you'll stay with me until the end.

Most likely, I'll be updating both this and Incarnate intermittently, as I find time at least a few days a week to add to each.

I know I'm not usually expressive with these notes, but seriously, thank you all so much. <3
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

He should have been more prepared to confront Imayoshi. Composed his emotions and acted objectively, like he always did. He knew Susa was an accomplice and a tangible threat yet he pursued the Dan anyway. Alone and jaded by revenge.

Chapter Notes

Apart from an unexpected hiatus, I’ve had this and the following chapter sitting in queue for publishing for months and I’ve been too anxious to put them up. Proof read them a thousand times, fixed things, and still wasn’t sure it would be satisfactory. But I just have to post it. If not for you guys sticking with me, then to ease my mind and remember that I have people out there who actually like and want to see this finished. I’m deeply sorry. Please accept this short chapter in lieu of my absence. /bows eternally

Scorching pain squeezed Kuroko’s throat as he clung to consciousness, still lying face down on the tatami of the Dan’s office. His mouth remained open in a silent scream as he heaved to vent shallow breaths. Like he had been since Imayoshi sealed the room a half hour ago. Or so it had felt. His hands remained curled around the leather collar, his fingers pressed between the material and his neck. Heat burned throughout the digits where flesh melded with blunt metal protrusions. He hadn’t dared to lift them. Not that he could.

When he had spotted the detonator in Imayoshi’s grasp, he knew he had to act fast. Removing the collar was not an option. A key was required to disengage a sophisticated locking mechanism, forged of conductive metal. The same metal that lined the interior of the choker with spikes poised to dole out a violent electrical charge straight to his brain. What may have appeared a futile attempt to rip the device off to the Dan was actually a last ditch effort to reduce the imminent threat to his life. At the expense of injury to himself, should he have survived.

And injury there definitely was.

Hot tears stung his eyes as a wave of pain ripped through his fingers at the slightest flex. His senses began to flicker and he tried to focus on the tick of the clock to remain alert. Blood pounded in his ears, deafening the only sound in the room to a drumbeat. He forced a swallow that felt like a spiny rock scratching his throat.

He should have been more prepared to confront Imayoshi. Composed his emotions and acted objectively, like he always did. He knew Susa was an accomplice and a tangible threat yet he pursued the Dan anyway. Alone and jaded by revenge.

He heard Aomine’s voice chastising him.  

_We’re partners now, y’hear? No more of this master-servant shit. We’re Aomine and Tetsu now._
A shudder racked his body and he stiffened to suffer the inflammation that followed.

Exhaustion was reeling his eyelids closed, energy deflating fast.

His vision eclipsed to a blurry sliver.

Faint pounding vibrated against his ears, distant but distinct. Metallic jangling accompanied the noise. A moment later the office door jerked open with a thump and a form stumbled inside.

A streak of pink washed into his fading sight.

He barely registered a garbled cry of Tetsu-kun.

The blur raced to him and he was rolled onto his back. Vertigo sloshed his brain.

Fingers frantically danced across his face, sweeping his brow and cheeks. An assessing hand hovered over his mouth and a tender pressure rested against his chest, over his heart. The weight and hand lifted and then warm digits gripped his glued to the collar. The voice released a murmured litany of distress, expressing words he could not understand but knew were fretful. In a swift movement, his fingers were pried loose from the leather and metal and he howled a parched cry as ensnared flesh was finally freed.

Another barrage of softly uttered words came with a comforting palm to his cheek. His breath sputtered as he was lifted by an arm, the hand cupping his face curling to support his head as he was positioned upright. Consciousness was dragging him away. His loose arm was grasped by the interloper’s as the form settled in front of him, between his outstretched legs. Again he saw pink, a narrow strip bright among the interloper’s dark clothes. A blip of admiration aggravated his stressed heart as he inhaled the familiar waft of lilac, being drawn onto a small back.

Bless Momoi.

She leaned forward, bearing his weight, and hooked her hands under his knees. Slowly she hefted them both off the floor.

A final shrug forward lurched his arms to dangle over her shoulders.

The comfort of Momoi’s presence melted him against her, the soporific effect of the perfume lulling his eyelids closed.

As his world dissolved away, he heard a clear enough whisper beside his ear.

I’ve got you, Tetsu-kun.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Kagami’s stomach erupted in a flutter as he slipped inside and tiptoed to the body.
His anxiety flushed immediately.
It was Aomine Daiki.

Chapter Notes

Wow, this has already hit 100 kudos? Thank you, everyone! I didn't figure it would hit that mark until after I finished the entire thing. More chapters have been scripted and we’re pushing along into the final stretch. I hope you all stick with me and enjoy the rest of TWCH.

The lack of sound within the cellar was discomforting, priming Kagami to stay on guard as he scoured the passageways. The paths were wide, cut large enough to accommodate carts and dollies to tow the spices and perishables stored below. Cool yet dry air preserved the goods until their desired usage. The change in temperature thawed the lethargy induced by the persistent humidity outside. A reprieve for now. Uncertain of what he would encounter, he’d decided to rely on the weak glow of the candles rather than his own light. Exposing himself after coming this far was pure foolishness. So far his disguise had been successful and he resolved that he could suck up the apprehensive feeling churning his gut and press on. It had been bubbling for a while now and Kagami assumed it was raw nerves. But after seeing the damage to Aomine’s bedchamber and speculating the worst case scenario, he came to understand it.

He was anxious.

What would Aomine say when they reunited? Would the stubborn ass even listen to him?

Had he already discovered Imayoshi’s treachery? If so, he definitely would not be in an approachable mood.

Thoughts stormed through his brain, drawing him off course twice into two dead end cellars. He retreated to an intersection opening either left or right. A ghostly etching on the stone wall, an arrow with an X crossed over it—a mark he’d made with a chunk of rock he chipped from the basement steps—announced that he’d already been there. Which left the unexplored direction. He fist ed the rock and entered the passage. After twenty yards, an offshoot opened but even in the faint light within he spied shelves abound with food receptacles. So he continued on.

A tingle crept up his spine as he followed the arc of the path, no other corridors breaching the stone.

Kagami wasn’t remotely superstitious but an unprovoked reaction to an invisible stimulus was
never a good sign.

He slowed as the arc straightened and peered ahead.

A steel door hung ajar at the end of the passage with only a single accessway breaking the unblemished tunnel.

He ignored a slosh of unease and eased close.

He held his breath and listened. No voices seeped through the gap. The faint gleam of firelight burned inside, tossing a pale yellow glow off what appeared to be hewn marble. Odd, considering the entirety of the basement was cast in granite. Had the interior been artificially manufactured? Possibly.

He took a quick look behind him to ensure no problems had tailed him. Susa was still unaccounted for. Yet there was nothing.

He pressed a hand to the door and nudged it open a smidge more. His gaze combed the geography. The underground cavern unfolded thirty feet wide and half that tall. He could not fathom its depth, though he guessed it could reach up to a thousand feet into the mountain and remain relatively safe for use. Water and rock were not compatible compounds. Stalactites drooped from the ceiling, excreting droplets in rhythmic cadence throughout. Larger sconces cupped oiled wicks that evened the distribution of light. Natural marble, coarse and angular, sheathed the entire expanse, a single thick column connecting floor to ceiling a few meters inside. True to its name, water shimmered off the rocks.

And to his relief, the air lacked moisture. Humidity provided no appeal to Ice Apparitions. Another quality the two species shared.

More force pried the hefty door open further and a heap on the floor commanded his attention. Three meters inside lay a man, dressed in a black three-quarters sleeved shirt, slate cargo pants, and combat boots with gaudy red laces winding the ankles. The man was large his body twisted as if there’d been a struggle, lying prostrate with his head tucked to his chest, out of sight. Something wrapping the man’s middle shone in the candlelight.

Kagami’s stomach erupted in a flutter as he slipped inside and tiptoed to the body. Light breathing confirmed the man was alive but definitely unconscious. A block of ice folded both arms to the spine and through the transparent sheeting he noticed the color of the hands. Dark like aged copper. His eyes zipped to the face. Short hair swept across the forehead where a gauze patch rested between the hairline and eyebrow.

His anxiety flushed immediately.

It was Aomine Daiki.

Kagami dropped to a knee, released the rock shard, and peppered the Apparition’s cheek with slaps meant to rouse him. His other was aglow with a blue-tinged flame. The heat began steadily devouring the sheath as he stroked the still cool binding.

How long had he been down here? Had Imayoshi shackled him? He couldn’t think of an alternative. Finding Aomine in the Water Room, unconscious and snuggled in an ice jacket, told him nothing good came from the Apparition’s confrontation with the Dan.

Water started to pool, the heat having eaten through about an inch.
But Aomine was not responding.

“Come on, jackoff,” he said, delivering a harsh pop. “Wake up.”

Another sharp smack with taut fingers and Aomine groaned.

Kagami reared his hand back to land what he hoped was the final assault but the back of his neck was clamped in a vicious grip and he was wrenched to his feet. The assailant, a bear-like specimen from what Kagami was feeling, snaked an arm around his throat and drug him backwards. Impressive muscles, far larger and more abundant than his, tightened and Kagami scrambled to mitigate the pressure. His resistance was met with rough jerks as the distance between he and the incapacitated Aomine lengthened. Kagami had never experienced tussling with a larger opponent before—he being the largest Fire Apparition man of his generation—and the thought that he would be subdued became a real possibility.

He stood a chance if he could wake Aomine.

But how?

Bear Man reared Kagami enough to lift him off the floor and then something hit him.

As annoying and smug as he was, exposure to Aomine had given him an idea.

He just hoped it hurt like hell and afforded him a moment to act.

When his feet touched down again he used inertia to fold himself and Bear Man over. He then reversed motion with a quick snap of his head into the man’s face. Bear Man howled, his hold loosening enough for Kagami to wedge a hand between a hairy arm and his throat.

“God dammit, aho,” he yelled. “I don’t have time for naps.”

Aomine’s brow twitched but he remained otherwise still.

The man renewed the assault and wrapped Kagami in a bear hug, tucking Kagami’s forearms against his chest where his hands still vied to separate himself from the brute. He was lifted again and he writhed violently, kicking his legs. Bear Man handled him, at ten pounds shy of 200, as if he were Kuroko’s size. Panic set in.

Fifteen feet lay between them and Aomine.

And he was running out of strength.

He ultimately decided that, to wake the troublesome bastard, he needed a free hand.

Kagami wiggled his shoulders, nudging Bear Man’s closest arm near his cheek. Once within reach, he craned down and sank his teeth into a chunk of muscle. The revolt only agitated the man into jarring him loose with nausea-inducing twisting. Kagami bit down harder, ignoring the wiry hairs tickling the roof of his mouth and tongue. Fire flared from his knuckles and trickled to his tightened fingers.

Driving his nails in, he tore back on the captured skin. Bear Man screeched and his injured arm flew away.

Kagami shoved himself away, siphoning the flames to his dominant hand.

He launched the shot with a lash of his arm, yelling, “Aomine.”
The missile pummeled the floor a foot from the prick’s face, tufts of pale orange fanning close.

His shirt was clutched and Bear Man wrenched him backward. The treads of his boots snagged grooves in the floor and sent him tumbling into the wall, his skull and spine pounding hard. Pain fired across his back, the scar voicing displeasure. The impact jarred his vision into a violent ripple. Rough fingers closed around his throat. He cursed himself as he clawed the offending hand.

A few inches more and the incendiary would have alarmed Aomine to the danger.

If he failed here, he sincerely hoped Akashi danced on his ashes.

The tight curl of blunt nails seeking his trachea intensified his panic and he bowed himself off the wall.

Bear Man drove his elbow into Kagami’s chest, blowing the wind out of him, and Kagami shrunk back to the marble. And the brute barred his chest to ensure he stayed there. The added pressure was making it difficult to breathe.

But he took the opportunity to ingest the identity of his attacker. Dark skin, though lighter than Aomine if by a fraction, and close cropped hair. A pair of stripes cut through at the temples and wound the skull. Black eyes glared menacingly and if Kagami could attach a word to the man, it’d be Jarhead. Which was appropriate now that he considered it. The hairstyle was idiosyncratic to one man.

Goryokaku’s combat squad chief. Nebuya Eikichi.

He was fucking screwed.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Aomine looked at the opponent’s face.

Peculiar forked eyebrows were crunched in distress.

An uneasy feeling unassisted by the ice chilled his chest.

What the hell was Kagami doing here?

Chapter Notes

Chuggin’ along! I had to take a brief pause because in an upcoming chapter comes a location that I only envisioned bits and pieces of, so I took the time to scribble out a diagram or two to help the descriptive process when I hit that point. I'm not certain if I'll include the map in-story, but I may provide a link to help you readers better visualize where the characters are. All I have to say on my time spent researching is WHY do royals have to construct these big ass rooms that serve absolutely no purpose but showcasing? DX So much architectural space wasted...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heat fanned Aomine’s face and though distant, it was no less alarming. His eyes snapped open too quickly and triggered what had been an adrenaline-soothed pain into overdrive. Nebuya’s final blow must have tipped his brain because an explosion of nausea and pressure squeezed his forehead and he sealed his eyes to slake it. What was going on around him?

He remembered feeling a smack to his face. Someone yelled for him. Then the fire—

Fire?

Fighting the numbness and strain of his frozen limbs, he threw a glance around the cavern.

Imayoshi and Susa were gone. Nebuya, he recalled, was tasked to guard him. So where was that turncoat?

Scuffling and strangled noises crept from nearby. He craned uncomfortably to find the source, the angular cuts of light swimming through his vision. A dark blur rippled into view. Nebuya. Who else would it be?

Blinking a few times cleared his sight and one form dissolved into two. And they were tussling.

The larger was definitely his minder, the bars cut through the hair evident. He was pinning someone to the wall. Nebuya ducked a swing and butted his opponent into the marble. One of the nearby candle scones splashed light onto the unknown person’s features. A man with black shaggy hair and a muscular body clothed in the gear of one of hunters. About as built-up as the chief give
or take thirty-to fifty pounds. What struck him was the fiery glint to the eyes.

Nebuya violently tugged the man into a headlock. The struggle turned them into the glow of the candlelight. Aomine looked at the opponent’s face.

Peculiar forked eyebrows were crunched in distress.

An uneasy feeling unassisted by the ice chilled his chest.

What the hell was Kagami doing here?

He thought about speaking but decided attracting the chief’s attention, while still incapacitated, was a poor idea.

Besides, he still owed the asshole for slamming his head into the ground.

The grunting escalated, provided by Kagami biting into the chief’s forearm.

Aomine shimmied, legs heavy with fatigue, and brushed something wet. He recoiled, the roundness of the casing moving him onto his side. Water was pooled on the floor beneath him, soaking into his pant leg. It wasn’t nearly humid enough to thaw the ice in the Water Room. He looked to the frozen binding and noticed the surface’s thickness was uneven. Sloping from his right shoulder to his waist, as if something hot had been set there.

Something hot…

An aggravated cry shot his attention across the room.

Nebuya threw Kagami against the wall again, the impact harsh if the prince’s shriek meant anything. The fight seeped from Kagami and the chief seemed to take a moment to calm from the assault.

Aomine pushed to lie flat, then rocked until he could wedge up a knee. Stiffness made rising difficult, thigh muscles protesting wearily. Tingles racked up his knees and he tumbled backwards to the floor.

Across the way, Kagami fared just as poorly. Nebuya fisted his shirt collar, the prince doing little to resist. Then the room’s only source of light zipped to Kagami’s hand, already flickering and tense, and like a shooting star, disappeared as the prince launched a punch into Nebuya’s face. Darkness swallowed the cavern so he wasn’t able to see how successful the blow was.

Silence. Then, “Aomine, get your ass in gear.”

He decided the time for pretense was over. “I can’t see. You turned out the lights.”

Aomine darted his gaze around the darkened space. He needed to break the restraints and assist Kagami in neutralizing the chief if he had any hope of getting out of this alive. Imayoshi wasn’t through him, as the Dan clearly illustrated by detaining rather than killing him. All the loose ends to his deceit had been silenced so far, and it was a fair bet to assume that Aomine had lost favor with the lunatic.

He scooted back on the coarse floor, grateful he still maintained the use of his hips and legs.

The fight resumed, indicative of the meaty sinking of exchanged blows becoming louder.

Another starfire shot ignited the brawl, Kagami going for the gut, then dissolved. Aomine stilled as
he heard the familiar thump of forehead-to-forehead contact, followed by a painful cry. From Kagami.

“Lights, Kagami,” he yelled.

The tussling escalated into a mash-up of grunts and another bone-crushing collision, a tart slap, like a palm on stone.

Panic squeezed his chest. Had he just cost Kagami his winning chance?

Orange-yellow bulbs blipped in the darkness then arced as if thrown and magnetized to the sconces’ oil wicks, bathing the Water Room in a languid golden shine.

Twenty-five feet away, Kagami had his arms raised together, shielding his face and chest from attack, Nebuya hooking punches aimed for the stomach.

Aomine noted the prince’s lethargic reactions. Slow, but timely enough to deflect the brunt. He needed to get the hell in there. Now.

As he wiggled onto his knees again, he searched for an expedient to crack the shell encasing him. He found the wall five feet behind him. Rough, porous, and angular. But would it be enough to penetrate the already weakened sheathing where Kagami’s fire had eaten through? Only one way to find out.

Keeping his attention on the quarrel, wary that Nebuya would prevail and rush to stop him, he thrust back into the wall. His aim proved effective, vibrations rattling above his wrist where the ice had been eroded. Successive ramming produced a pleasing crackling sound but his movements were still restricted. He gave another harsh shove into the stone and a frozen chunk clattered to the floor.

He stopped to catch his breath, adrenaline masking the angry swarm in his brain, and looked ahead.

Kagami untucked his arms and captured an incoming swing for his face. His twisted the offending arm, whirled the chief around, and planted a kick into the man’s lower back. The chief stumbled forward but did not collapse. The prince pushed off the wall. Nebuya spun and Kagami launched a kick for the disoriented chief’s midsection.

The man’s left hand clutched Kagami’s ankle, putting the prince off balance. Nebuya swung his right leg, curling it around Kagami’s knee. A swift flex drove the prince belly-first to the floor, his ankle still in the chief’s grip.

Nebuya wrenched the limb back.

A sickening pop was heard.

Kagami screamed.

─

Kagami’s senses bungled as he slammed to the grainy marble. The muscles of his thighs tore in
agony and the unperceivable bowing of his leg rocketed pain through him. His knee panged violently. His breathing skyrocketed and an intense pressure flooded his brain as the hold on his ankle loosened, dropping his leg to the floor. The ache was almost unbearable and flushed the appendage without abandon.

The chief’s presence hovered heavy around him and he was quickly learning why this man was elected the combat chief. Nebuya’s torrential offensive style succeeded in using terse, powerful, and well-targeted blows to exhaust the stamina. Emotions only piqued their efficiency.

Distantly he again heard the exertion of Aomine trying to free himself. While he took a knee against the chief’s earlier assault, he’d caught a glimpse of the Apparition’s struggle and found the method ingenious. Aomine must have noticed the weakened ice, the entire casing no more than two inches thick. Brute force, if aptly applied, would destroy the confines and the irregular surface of the Water Room provided an excellent tool. So long as the idiot struck it precisely and repeatedly enough before the chief killed him.

Nebuya fisted the back of his collar and belt at the small of his back and hoisted him up as if lifting a bale of hay. His body was thrown across the man’s shoulder, spine down. The hand at his belt curled over his thighs, the other cupping his throat. His heart shuddered as he realized too late what was about to happen.

The chief pulled down harshly, bowing Kagami’s back. Tension seized his muscles. Moisture stung his eyes. And he screamed again, eyes shut tight.

He forced his frozen arms to move, hands flying to his throat. Nebuya stooped, the hold on his legs slipping to his knees to maximize the torture as his spine was further folded.

Fear consumed him and he cracked open his eyes to find Aomine, who he couldn’t hear over the blood gushing into his head.

The watery blur across the room was rising from the floor, clumsy and jerky in motion. No sooner as Aomine stood did he collapse again to the floor and a muffled clatter beat his ears.

“Aomine,” he cried, trying to gain the man’s attention.

Air vacuumed from his chest as he felt Nebuya’s body lean, the ceiling reeling away. Hands on his thighs pushed forward, zooming the floor closer. The one on his throat came away and his head tucked to his chest.

His neck jammed into the floor with a crunching thud. The world winked in and out. Nausea shot up from his stomach then plummeted back down as he unrolled onto the floor, face up.

Breaths heaved from his aching ribs.

Nebuya was getting back up.

This was it.

He was dead.
Aomine stared in disbelief among the fractured ice casing. He’d become impatient with bashing himself against stone, feeling just force was not enough. That was when he decided to let gravity take over. The angle of impact was jarring, but it only took three attempts before the chilly prison finally broke apart.

Just as the chief plummeted Kagami headfirst into the floor.

He’d heard the curdling distressed noise that escaped the prince as he flattened to the ground. Noticed the sputtering of his chest.

Nebuya was facing away from him. And rising.

He needed to stop him.

Aomine sprang to his feet, debris clinking to the floor, and raced forward.

Nebuya turned to his approach, shock filling the man’s face.

He let adrenaline take over. He surged on, spearing a knee into the bastard’s gut. The chief doubled over, a wheezing breath following as he cradled his stomach. He hooked his left arm around the chief’s right and angled his shoulders down. As he scooped his arm under the man’s groin, he used leverage to hurl the chief to the floor. Nebuya landed with a heavy thud and Aomine’s grip on his arm kept him close. As the chief made contact, he reared back and pummeled a harsh kick to the shoulder. The pop he felt through his boot did little to satisfy him. Nor did the howl of pain as he released the chief’s arm to allow the pitiful fool to roll and protect his abused middle.

The flood of rage and anguish coursing through him told him this was not enough.

Nebuya was a catalyst to his century-long, hollow life.

A thief who stole away his ability to exercise anger.

Well now he’d get a taste of it.

What a hundred years of suppressed emotion felt like.

Chapter End Notes

Again for the purpose of visualization, are links provided that illustrate the combat moves I used.
Nebuya against Kagami: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhFDN1w72zU (2:53-2:54)
Aomine against Nebuya: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVyjgpeFB9s (2:40-2:42)

When I was scripting the story, I was heavy into playing this game. . .
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Aomine’s wound would not and every time he looked at it, he would remember his ineptitude.

Just what was Kagami supposed to do to correct that?

He’d spent the ride mulling it over and so far nothing answered that quandary.

Chapter Notes

I'm doing better at making time to punch out the chapters. Deciding to work on one story at a time was probably the best thing. Meaning that, apart from editing some mathematical errors on Incarnate (my math is just that horrible), I will be focusing on one work at a time.

Though now that my sister's boyfriend has moved into our room, my writing station looks like an electrical junkyard and it's throwing me off. Hopeful to rearrange that.

Enjoy the chapter, everyone. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kagami’s brain stormed with affliction, but he was grateful to have returned to consciousness. His neck had not taken the full force of being bombed, his shoulder instigating a similar throbbing. His senses realigned, fading back in as if dialing a volume knob. Slowly he rose, palming his neck.

Where was Nebuya? And why didn’t he hear the clash of rock on ice?

What he did hear was bone-crunching thuds finding cadence with the dripping stalactites. From somewhere nearby and behind him.

He craned a look over his shoulder. Ten feet away lay the chief’s prostrate body. Still and boneless.

Crouched over him was Aomine. Repeatedly slamming the man’s skull into the floor.

Kagami, against the strain of his muscles, sprang to his feet and hobbled to stop the hunter. Luckily the chief hadn’t dislocated the bone, his gait only limited to a gimp. Accomplice to a public relations nightmare aside, he could not allow Aomine to kill Nebuya. Akashi would not be the only one to take it out of his hide if he allowed it.

He grabbed Aomine and yanked him away. The man struggled. Nebuya remained motionless and Kagami worried he may have acted too late.

“Aomine, stop.”

“Get off me,” Aomine growled.
He tightened his hold on the thrashing man’s arms, pulling them towards the still partially-cracked door. They needed to leave. He wasn’t certain when Susa would materialize to thwart them, if the man was still a threat. But he was not sticking around to find out.

And neither was Aomine.

He led them out the portal, resistance waning the farther they distanced themselves from Nebuya. Time was not a factor to their escape, nor was discovery, but the engorging knot in his stomach told him that the sooner they left this place, with Aomine intact, the better he’d feel. He could contact Kuroko later to report his success.

They jogged through the flexuous pathways, the arrows, though pointing back to the Water Room, guiding him back to the stairway with little difficulty. His hold slipped from Aomine’s bicep to his wrist and the man had yet to object to the contact. Once cleared of the subterranean maze, Kagami retracted his course through the third temple where few Apparitions loitered. Construction on the impaired quarters was likely responsible, he surmised. Outside the plaza pulsed with more people, disbanded from the earlier announcements, their voices carrying with a mixture of amazement and revulsion. He took a moment to recollect himself, the pile driver from the chief having boggled his memory as to which temple was the fourth. He studied the towering facades looming on either side of the third temple, where they’d just come from, and thought back to the map ensconced in his pouch. The fifth angled due south and counted down to one clockwise.

Straight ahead, standing tall with five stacks, was the fifth temple. Meaning the building seated on its right was where he needed to go.

He pulled Aomine along, the man still having said nothing, and hurried across the plaza despite the gimp to the exterior catwalk bridging temple three to four.

Fifteen feet shy of entering the fourth temple plaza, the railing broke to unravel wooden treads easing down. They descended, following the steps as they doglegged and sunk to connect with the mountain. Kagami slackened his pace as the last plank was swallowed by a pathway stripped bare of brush and pebbles by foot traffic. Coppices lined the trail. Birds vocalized within them. A hare sourcing a clump of daisies dashed into the underbrush as they cleared the one hundred foot wall of birch trees. The hunter’s guild headquarters came into view forty yards away but the doublewide doors that had earlier been sealed were now thrown open. Inside, Kagami could see men ambling through the lobby.

His grip hardened on Aomine’s wrist. He could not let the hunters see their commander. The man was meant to leave this place, not be swamped and either profusely venerated or ridiculed. He’d heard enough of both on the central deck and catwalks. Around the west side of the building was where he was certain he had secured their ride out of here. He trained his eyes on the open portal and carefully nudged Aomine behind him as he stepped them off the trail. He kept his steps muted and Aomine seemed to understand, as he, too, took careful steps. They reached the safety of the west wall and he finally released the hunter’s hand.

Light was quickly fading and he threw a cursory glance at their surroundings to ensure no patrolling or traipsing Apparitions were nearby. No one lingered outside. From nearby windows he could hear the jostle of many conversations, volumes discordant but loud enough to mask their escape.

He whistled, lips taut over his teeth. Speaking may not have been in his repertoire, but Mitobe Rinnosuke had excelled at producing what were possibly the most ear-splitting whistles Kagami had ever heard. Loose-lipped tunes, as it turned out, were not the way to command an elk’s attention. One sharply belted note, though, was. From behind a stately ash tree appeared his
familiar. The officer who had admitted him into the Lightning fort retrieved the animal and, once the plan had been laid to recover Aomine, Kagami had asked that the elk be transported to the west wall of the hunter’s guild at Goryokaku. His position as the heir apparent of the Fire crown ensured no arguments. And he was relieved to see his request honored. The animal came close and he secured the leads, giving the body a onceover. No injuries. The saddle pad and attached pouch remained intact. Rested nostrils and even breathing told him there was no threat of overexertion.

He looked to Aomine, who stood incredulously.

“Climb on,” he said. “I’ll ride shotgun.”

The man’s eyes flickered between him and the elk, brows creasing.

“I’m more of a dog person,” Aomine said.

The stale sarcasm disarmed Kagami for a moment. Just how disoriented was Aomine?

“Either get on or be thrown on.”

Aomine’s body tensed at the demand and for a moment, he thought he saw a spark of mutiny in the man’s dark eyes. But then Aomine unhinged his shoulders and approached the bull, giving one last cagey glance at him. He laid one hand across the saddle pad and the other across the withers. Kagami braced Aomine’s raised calf and boosted him onto the pad with a one-two-three count-off. The elk teetered to adjust to the weight. Kagami draped the leads over the animal’s neck and then retreated to position himself at the bull’s rear, allowing himself a short runway to mount. One person was the maximum capacity for cows and Kagami, mindful of the smaller stature of his familiar, had maintained the rule in consideration for his larger size. He neared in three bounding steps, planted his hands on the croup, and vaulted onto the saddle pad. Momentum flushed him to Aomine’s back.

He retook the reins, using his arms to cage the man in front of him. A tug turned the bull and he gave a last fleeting look through the guild’s windows to ensure their departure went unnoticed.

Jovialities continued inside without interruption.

He turned his attention forward, closed his arms tighter, and spurred the animal with a jab to the flank.

The bull reared its head back.

Then tore off into the forest.

Where to, Kagami wasn’t sure.

But anywhere else was better than here.

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Kagami craned his head to the sky. Through the trees whipping by overhead he saw that the overcast that had been hanging around all week was seaming back together. The residual glare of the evening sun burned a fiery halo on the horizon perceivable though gaps in the conglomeration
of lofty pines. His internal clock suggested that he and Aomine had been riding for about half an hour. Still the man had been silent and Kagami hadn’t thought to disrupt his private thoughts. Even after escaping Goryokaku the knot in his belly had not loosened. How could it now that he was alone with Aomine?

Saving his life aside, what did the man have to be grateful for? Since their first meeting, Kagami had done nothing but antagonize him. Twice in the last week he’d tried to kill Aomine. A second degree burn during their first encounter would forever mark the man’s unfortunate run-in with a surly Fire Apparition. Kuroko was wrong before. You both bear the other’s mark. The score is settled. His brand would heal, as he’d been assured by Sakurai, and evaporate as if it never happened. Aomine’s would not and every time he looked at it, he would remember his ineptitude. How Imayoshi’s elaborate deception robbed him of everything he could have ever wanted.

Just what was Kagami supposed to do to correct that?

He’d spent the ride mulling it over and so far nothing answered that quandary.

The elk’s breaths grew more labored and he decided to use the vestigial daylight to secure them shelter for the night. Supposing they hadn’t surpassed the range of the radio, he could call Kuroko and let the shadow know that Aomine was safe. A gentle pull on the leads decelerated the animal to a trot. Another few yards and he halted the elk, which snorted a hard breath and lowered its head to the turf.

He knotted the leads and slid off. Aomine dismounted to the opposite side.

Kagami turned back to the darkening silhouette of forest.

“We need to pick a spot to bunk for the night,” he said. “Chances are that if you didn’t kill him, Nebuya won’t remember that I helped you escape.”

He walked around the elk, stroking its shoulder and looked to Aomine for confirmation. The man appeared anything but acquiescing, his posture rigid. His face was lowered to the floor, eyes searching for something. His breathing climbed as if he’d been jogging a marathon.

He had a feeling he knew what was happening. All the adrenaline in the Water Room, when Aomine was assaulting Nebuya, was finally draining from his system. Reality was filing in its place.

He needed to corral Aomine’s attention and calm him down before he became inconsolable. Or worse, impulsive.

He stepped closer, keeping both his steps and voice soft. “Aomine.”

The man tossed his head up, taking a step backward. Not good. Fear, confusion, and anger flushed his bruised and scraped face.

Kagami raised a tempering hand and took another step forward, smaller than his last, and dialed down his voice like he was speaking to a wounded animal. “I’m here. I got you.” The words sounded foreign coming from his mouth but being domineering was not going to get him anywhere.

Aomine shuffled another step away. Kagami retained his distance.

“Night’s falling. We need to make camp.”
The man’s head dipped again and he noticed the sudden busying clench-unclench of his hands. His chest vented shallower breaths and any traces of the fear Kagami detected before vanished behind tightening features. He opened his mouth to speak again but the elk suddenly jerked its head up, a violent shudder travelling its spine. Blunted antlers threatened to prod him and Kagami raised a guarding arm.

Apparently that was all the incentive Aomine needed.

He’d tensed in the moment Kagami flinched, backpedalling a few steps, then whipped around and bolted through the throng of firs and pines.

“Aomine,” he yelled but to no avail as the man raced on. He wrangled the nearest prong and looked the bull in the eye. “Thanks for nothin’.”

Disregarding the animal, he hurried through the brush, unmarked by trodden pathways, after Aomine. The man’s pace was desperate and brought Kagami back to a similar situation. Two days ago. When, propelled by misguided emotions spurred by the sight of the fallen Kaizer, he had pursued Aomine. Back then, the hunter had been trying to escape unjust wrath. And now?

He was not certain what had transpired between Aomine and the Dan but knew that appearing threatening would do little to earn the man’s trust.

So he slowed his gait, keeping a safe distance from the man, and followed.

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Icy thorns prickled his throat and chest as Aomine ran. Somehow he’d thought that everything that had happened in the last few hours had been a dream. Discovering his hindered powers in the bathhouse. Deciding to accost Imayoshi. Learning that Tetsu had fallen on the blade to protect him. And his parents and children becoming sacrifices to bury his uncle’s paranoia.

As he’d lain unconscious on the Water Room floor, it had all seemed so unrealistic. One person’s life amounting to such grand deception and misery. Family ties manipulated for personal benefit and loyalties tested in the name of national security. Being elevated from a derelict to a harbinger of Lightning hegemonic resistance in a matter of hours. An entire lifetime misdirected.

But it was far from fantasy and once he’d awoken, swaddled in a blanket of ice and seeing Kagami battling Nebuya it had all come crashing back. Imayoshi had betrayed him. Stole him from his parents. Neutralized his innate gift. Steered his life to conformity then destroyed it. Had it all been to keep Aomine perpetually obedient? Leaving him a lumbering husk, siphoned of any positive emotions that pettily trailed after the only person who had ever embraced him?

His chest hollowed as he came to a humiliating conclusion.

That was exactly what the Dan had accomplished.

And he blindly allowed it to happen.

The pounding of his boots soles numbed his feet to the uneven terrain. His lungs burned and his knees began to resist him.
Ghostly images floated across his mind. Watching the Ice children being mentored on the central deck while he stood aside, unable to participate. The awkward, post-engagement dinner between him and Satsuki. The first time Tetsu smiled for him. Satsuki cradling their firstborn moments after delivery. Holding her as she cried after interring the cremated remains of their last child.

He cleared the forest edge and entered a shallow plateau that overlooked a valley guarded by a wall of folded peaks, their menacing loom splashed with errant rays of waning sunlight. The cliff edge lay one hundred yards away. He slowed, the overexertion to his legs staggering him to stop before the precipice. The fibers thrummed with agitation as his body flushed with rage and anguish. He stared into the valley mottled in varying shades of green and gold, their vibrance complimented by a network of rivers and lakes.

His parents were gone. His children. Tetsu.

The prickling in his chest suffused, filling his arms, stomach, and legs. A scratching sensation attacked his muscles. Pressure exploded behind his eyes and nose and his vision became watery.

Warm tears streaked his cheeks. His throat swelled tight and he decided to submit. He could not hold back anymore.

He tipped his head skyward and, wrapped in an intense white hot light, screamed.

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve any questions, don't hesitate to ask. : )
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

“You’ve got me all to yourself now that you whisked me from the castle, your highness.” Aomine tossed his arms down, opening his chest. “So take your shot.”

Kagami sprang from the grass.

His hand coming for Aomine.

Chapter Notes

Been trying to stay at least two chapters ahead to give myself a cushion. I'm so pumped to finish this out but actually sitting down to orchestrate it... haha. As always, thank you guys for the continued support. In upcoming chapters there will be some newly introduced terminologies that I'll do my best to ease you guys into. And if you've any questions, don't hesitate to ask. I'd rather you be informed than confused.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kagami froze at the sight before him. He wasn’t sure which part of the display was more astonishing. Aomine being shrouded in a violent, pulsing lightning strike or the agonizing wail of a man emotionally bereaved and abused beyond repair. The surge completely engulfed his body in a brilliant white glow, spewing from the pewter overcast in a jagged column. Thunder gurgled in warning as the current persisted unnaturally. Aomine’s form began to disappear within the tower of light.

That wasn’t good. If Aomine lost control of the energy, he’d be assimilated into it. Like he had been when he’d electrocuted Kagami and disappeared into the clouds as supercharged particles. And understanding the source of the man’s lamentation, he needed to intervene before Aomine blindly teleported himself in search of the Dan.

The jog through the uneven woodlands taxed his knee but he urged cooperation as he rushed ahead. Only fragments of Aomine’s body remained visible within the undulating light. The lesser half of his right leg. A sliver of the shoulder. His left hand and wrist.

Kagami steeled himself for reprisal as he drew closer to the waves of heat emanating off the bolt, an intensity more fierce than any flame he could generate, and grabbed Aomine’s wrist. Contact succeeded in breaking the stream and he spun the man around to face him. Residual coils frayed from Aomine’s arms and shoulders, disintegrating as they traveled skyward.

The expression striking the hunter’s face was one Kagami had not wanted to see. Rage swam through eyes tightened with scorn and distrust and moistened with tears of loss. The brow scrunched in insult, advertising a demand for privacy that Kagami could not grant him.

He spoke quietly. “I need you to calm down.”
In the moment Aomine’s nostrils flared and his lips curled over clenched teeth, Kagami knew he’d uttered the taboo. But he hadn’t the time to retract. His head snapped to the side as Aomine’s knuckles lashed his cheek. He maintained a solid grip on the man’s wrist and took a moment to collect himself, rotating his jaw to thaw the spiny waves of pain. Aomine did nothing to extricate himself but Kagami wagered that was because the hunter planned to score a few free jabs to satisfy his aggression.

Bereaved or not, he was no punching bag and he’d make that point clear. He gave his jaw one more shift, then met Aomine's glare.

The words came heavy with contempt as if Aomine was speaking directly to his oppressor. “He did all of this. Killing my parents. Snuffing out my children. Using me, his fucking nephew, to hide all of it.” His tone flared. “How’s it feel, your highness?” Aomine ripped his arm free from Kagami’s grip and shoved his shoulder. “How’s it feel watching me suffer, knowing you were fucking right about everything? Is that why you pulled me out of there? Well go ahead and fucking gloat because Imayoshi is a damned liar.”

He’d heard enough. He shot his hand over the hunter’s mouth. Retaliation was deferred to a terse moment of silence, where they glared at each other. He hadn’t expected to be so offended by the diatribe and he’d wanted to rebuke the accusation but this matter was not about him. What he needed was to ease Aomine’s temper and secure them a spot for the night.

“You got that outta your system yet?” he asked.

Aomine knocked away his hand. The straightening of his back told Kagami that he was gearing up for another reprimand. Kagami stiffened and the words that followed came without thought.

“I’m sorry, damn it,” he shouted.

Aomine deflated a fraction, disbelief melting the hard lines creasing his brow.

“For all of this,” he continued, seeming as the hunter was allowing him to speak. “For Imayoshi’s cruelty. Manipulating you and your ex-wife. I know you want to beat the man within an inch of life. And if you want to collect your grievances outta my hide too, then fine.” He pointed to the darkening sky. “But you sending a beacon like you just did is only gonna get you found and killed. Or did you forget that Susa Yoshinori’s also in on Imayoshi’s little conspiracy?”

Aomine said nothing. Anger was slowly evaporating but the man’s eyes remained rightfully wary.

“We need to hole up for the night. Supposing the overcast holds, we can make it to morning without worrying about Susa springing up on us.”

Contrary to their name, the Shadow Apparitions were diurnal, operating during daylight hours. The sun provided the deepest shadows, allowing them the greatest opportunities to utilize their skills. Full moons were the only nocturnal exception to the rule. Aomine seemed to consider this as his head dipped, his stiff brow indicative of a man warring with himself to trust an informed enemy.

Kagami allowed him to contemplate. The hunter could very well deny his involvement and fight his way out to tackle the problem solo. Trying to stop him, should he choose to run, would only re-implicate Kagami as an adversary. Which would help neither he nor Aomine.

The hunter sighed heavily through his nose.

Then nodded his head.
Aomine sat against the girth of a burly pine tree, the flicker of a small fire a few feet away providing scant warmth that did little to relax him. His eyes were trained on the canopy overhead where Kagami busied himself preparing traps. While the prince had prepared protection on the ground, he'd recognized the devices as those employed by his guild. No doubt appropriated when Kagami sojourned to the temple little more than a week ago. Half of the tripwires encircled a tight fifteen foot radius around the campfire.

His gaze fell to the embers. What was he supposed to say to Kagami? He was surprised at the lack of hostility, uncharacteristic of the hot-tempered prince not to broadcast his annoyance. But it reassured him that Kagami was not in a mindset of revenge. Yet, anyway.

Which made him wonder. Why was Kagami in Goryokaku?

From above came a snap, like a breaking twig, and then Kagami was dropping to the shaggy turf, landing in a well-practiced crouch. He flinched, startled by the sudden reappearance. Kagami appraised him carefully as he stood and dusted himself. He relaxed as the man limped to the tree and sat himself an arm’s length away.

They remained in stressed silence, palatable in the three feet separating them. The crinkle and pop of the kindling provided the only sound. He’d wanted to explore Kagami’s sudden involvement but could not find the words, his confidence to speak overwhelmed by the reality that there he sat, beside a man who two days ago had been a breadth away from killing him. Either Kagami was a psychopath or possessed the extraordinary gift of preventing past emotions from contaminating present situations.

After a few minutes of catching the man sneaking peripheral glances at him, he dropped his private inquiry and cut a glare at Kagami.

“Will you stop looking at me?”

Kagami sputtered, clearly caught off guard. “Just making sure the loaded gun is on safety.”

Aomine sniffed at the accusation. Kagami sighed and ran a hand through his hair, scratching at the back of his head.

“If this whole thing would have gone my way, I wouldn’t even be here with you.”

His way? Had the prince volunteered to remove him from the temple? Appreciating the dropped opportunity to question the prince, he had another more pressing concern he wanted answered.

“Overlooking your horrible companionship, what the hell did you do to your hair?”

If the jab bothered Kagami, he didn’t show it. Instead he brushed his fingers through the darkened mess of fringe. “I did nothing. This whole number,” he motioned to his head, “including my maimed do, was orchestrated by your little buddy, Kuroko.”

A cold feeling swept through him at the mention of Tetsu. He sat up straight and said, “He sent you?”
“Tracked me down at the fort and roped me into this little operation. Fitted me up like one of your hunters then sent me to find you.”

His hope, fragile from Imayoshi’s earlier taunt, piqued and he asked, “And what about him? Where’d Tetsu go?”

Kagami crossed his arms over his raised knees. “He went off to confront the Dan. Last I heard from him, he’d met up with your ex somewhere and she pointed me to Imayoshi’s haunts. Said finding him would help me find you.”

Had he heard right? Tetsu went to face off against Imayoshi? Alone? Then what the Dan had said before…

*It’s fortunate that Kuroko will no longer be able to corrupt you.*


Insult flashed across Kagami’s face before his stare hardened.

“I tried telling him to let me help but he refused.” He leaned closer and added, with emphasis, “Several times.”

“And you just rolled over?”

Kagami sneered. “Even got a belly run for being a good dog.”

Aomine shoved his shoulder and pushed himself off the trunk of the pine tree. Kagami snagged his elbow and yanked him down to the grass where he nary missed whacking his head on the coarse scaly bark.

He glowered at Kagami.

The prince squeezed his arm. “Sit your ass down.”

“You fucking asshole,” he breathed. “Because of you—”

“Because of me,” Kagami’s voice overrode his with unprecedented command, “you’re no longer at the mercy of Imayoshi and his little rebel posse.”

“You got him killed.”

“How do you know that? Because you let Imayoshi into your head, like an idiot, and believed everything he told you, didn’t you?”

He did not appreciate the scolding but any retort died on his tongue, his throat tight once again with emotions he did not want to express.

Kagami’s grip slackened. “Kuroko and your ex asked me to do everything I could to get you out of that temple. Everyone else can see how toxic your uncle is. And after whatever happened between you and him, you’re still clinging onto his lies?”

Aomine remained silent and forced himself to maintain eye contact. Any admission of defeat was unacceptable.

“You don’t know for sure that Kuroko didn’t make it out.” The prince gave a squeeze to his elbow as if to fortify his argument. “Now have some damn faith in the little guy and worry about yourself
long enough to catch half a decent night’s sleep.”

Though completely raw and gruff, Kagami pressed a valid point. Tetsu had proven himself so valiant and cunning an Apparition that he managed to elevate himself to a grade-A assassin and achieved the recognition of the Rus-Ainu as a formidable asset. Even the Ice, punitive members of the empire’s Wolf Pack, acknowledged him. The shadow was a well-studied observer of people’s actions, going lengths to understand how the body deceived the mind’s intentions. Even contestation with Imayoshi, another avid observer, proved how exceptional Tetsu was at navigating the psychological minefield with an adversary. Every encounter between his partner and uncle was a dueling ground. Snarky jabs and reprisals all thinly veiled as servant-master discourse. Each a warning to the other that neither was surrendering.

Tetsu had known exactly who his foe was.

Disallowing Kagami, whose battle experiences were more instinctual than cerebral, to enter the fray suddenly made sense. Had the prince assisted, the maverick may have gotten them both killed. Especially with Susa, another battlefield pundit, batting for the away team.

A deep sigh calmed his temper, which Kagami appeared to sense, as he finally released Aomine’s arm. He scooted his back against the bark. It wouldn’t be the most comfortable slumber, but Kagami was right. He needed to rest his strained body. The prince was likewise repositioning, slowly reclining against the trunk in a slouch and hissing when his shoulders flattened to the tree. Abused from Nebuya tenderizing it on the Water Room wall, no doubt.

He could not resist the quip. “Want me to kiss it better?”

Kagami tossed him an unimpressed look. He smirked.

“You’re no fun.”

“If you’re looking for a retort, come back to me in the morning once my brain has rebooted.”

Aomine knotted his fingers in his lap and folded his legs. On the off chance they came under fire from hostiles or Susa decided to show himself, he didn’t want to be found toppled over. Having his ankles crossed, like Kagami, stood the greater risk of rolling off the tree. Then again, with as adamant as the prince had been earlier that Aomine stay put, maybe the man was not looking to actually sleep at all. And the implication of being guarded by an up-in-the-air unconfirmed ally did not sit well with him.

Especially one who had a score to settle.

Kagami wiggled for comfort and finally found it after several minutes. Then in a strangely calm voice unbefitting a man of his ornery disposition, he said, “Hyuuga’s secretary told Kuroko and I about the Dan and your parents.”

That surprised him. There was another person besides Susa who was privy to the conspiracy? How was that possible? He shot a questioning look to the prince but the man’s eyes were homed on the glowing timbers, where only splinters were left to be consumed. Who was the secretary? He searched his frazzled memory.

Kagami glanced at him, apparently drawn by his silence. He cocked a brow, as if asking Are you serious, but when Aomine said nothing, the prince supplied, “Sakurai Ryou. Little squirrely guy who kept gawking at you during the summit. Profuse with apologies and looks way younger than one hundred and eighty-three.”
He thought back to the meeting in Kurokawa castle shortly before he and Kagami were ejected by the Lord. From across the table he recalled the Kaizer’s secretary sneaking quick peeks at him but never able to hold his eye. At least not then. When the secretary did, it was while Aomine was trying to elude Kagami in the fort. He’d rammed into the little man in his haste and only after apologizing for existing and addressing the blood spotting Aomine’s clothes did the man look at him.

“Says he delivered and cared for you as a baby.”

Which now explained the endearing, dewy-eyed glint to the secretary’s eyes.

But not why Kagami agreed, contrary to their entire pugnacious association, to help bail him out. Even with Tetsu’s persuasion, there had to be a hidden agenda. After all, their contest was still ongoing. While absconding the third temple, Aomine had caught a look at Kagami’s belt. He was armed, the kodachi holstered and sitting atop the pouch holding the stolen tripwires now protecting them. Meanwhile Aomine’s weapons remained at Goryokaku, discarded from his person when Satsuki had tended to his wounds.

The realization put him on edge and he tensed, appraising the prince with a calculating stare. Kagami had resumed watching the embers.

“What the hell are you trying to do?”

Kagami seemed shocked by the inquiry. He did not allow him a chance to deflect.

“You’re lobbying awful hard for me to relax. Then you try disarming me about the connection between my parents and Sakurai.”

Kagami sat up, eyes crinkling. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m not an idiot, idiot,” he snapped. “I know you’re armed and I know you’re aiming to one-up me.”

“You’re looking awful black there, pot.”

He ignored the criticism. “Suppose I make it through the night alive. Then what? Why did you even tag along?”

The prince’s cheeks flushed red but not from embarrassment, evident from the snarl. “I told you. Kuroko asked me.”

“That’s not what I asked you,” he barked. “Tetsu wanted your cooperation. I’m asking where this suspicious show of charity came from.”

Kagami said nothing, looking absolutely affronted. And his silence was becoming an admission of guilt. As it had been with Satsuki in the infirmary. Then later with Imayoshi in the Water Room. His temper flared and that once painful sensation in his chest that accompanied his anger prickled harmlessly, like a vibrating mass. He was tired of being deceived. Of being lied to. And Kagami, as an enemy who’d been nothing but brutally honest about his opinions, was the last person he had expected falsehoods from.

Aomine rose onto a knee, bringing himself to tower over the prince. “You’re either here out of pity for my deplorable circumstances or to make certain I stay alive long enough to carve another mark on that portable scoreboard of yours. All you have to do is wait ‘til I fall asleep then you’ll have earned that fucking gold star you seek.” Static hairs leapt from his skin unbidden. “You’ve got me
all to yourself now that you whisked me from the castle, your highness.” He tossed his arms down, opening his chest. “So take your shot.”

Flames erupted from the red dusting Kagami’s cheekbones, igniting the slope of his brow, his eyes aglow with fury.

He sprang from the grass.

His hand coming for Aomine.

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Kagami cradled his throbbing forehead. His brain did not appreciate the abuse earlier provoked by headbutting the combat chief. He’d planned to take a knee and let Aomine unwind. Then the idiot had to break out with the royalty jabs again, something he could not tolerate. He doubted knocking their heads together solved the problem. But he’d acted impulsively, fisting the man’s collar and the cranial slap that followed rattled his teeth.

His effort wasn’t entirely wasted, though.

Aomine had shut up.

The hunter was also caressing his head, the impact having collapsed him to the grass. Kagami had somehow managed to resist crumpling. To his relief, the electric hackles had disappeared. The power was still new and driven by a primitive emotion that Aomine hadn’t the experience taming. He’d known better than to encourage the man’s temper. But he had not predicted that the man would be looking for a fight.

Before, he had no intention of explaining his involvement. Hopeful that a blanket statement of conscription would placate Aomine. That seemed no longer feasible.

Aomine leveraged himself onto an elbow and sent him a menacing look. Defiance blackened the man’s dark eyes. Kagami decided to throw caution to the wind.

“You’ve been his hostage, Aomine,” he said. “Not his family.”

The man said nothing, only looking on.

So he continued. “The only reason he didn’t kill you was because he planned from the start to manipulate you. He may have been your uncle. But you were never his nephew.” He shifted back against the tree, mindful to respect his agitated wound. “You don’t deserve his abuse. I don’t like you but I wasn’t going to let it continue.”

He appraised Aomine with a resigned stare, the physical stress endured in the Water Room weighing his muscles with fatigue. If the hunter was still angling for confrontation, he could berate Kagami while he slept. Instead of the passive aggressive ribbing he expected, the man sat up and reclined against the trunk.

Pain stretched across his shoulders, distending into his neck as he tipped his skull back. Slipping down to lift pressure from the groove of his back only added to his discomfort. Sleeping outdoors was something he sparsely did, only when necessary. He imagined the shape of the Lichtenburg
figure in his mind, remembering that it snaked from a thorny head on his left shoulder and veined to a thin tail that disappeared just off-center on the small of his back. Meaning that at least one shoulder was unblemished. He tested the theory and was pleased that the barb of pain lancing his neck and shoulders blurred.

Aomine mumbled, “Stop fidgeting.”

He batted the hunter’s shoulder. “Go to sleep, aho.”

Chapter End Notes

This fic will very easily reach 100k words and I'm not sure how I feel about that...
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

“He knows what we do and we still don’t know who he is. Are you absolutely positive he didn’t give you a name?”

Kagami cut him a dry look. He understood the message. *Do I look like an idiot?*

Aomine cocked a brow. “Right now? Yes.”

Chapter Notes

Too many things have happened since I last posted. And every single one of them has interfered with continuing this story. Worsening depression, non-existent motivation, endless aggravation of domestic and work life. To all who have been so patient and will continue to be, and for those who have supported me this far, I say that I am deeply sorry and unbelievably grateful. I will push through this block and complete this story. Thank you. (It is also very unnerving of me to post this after it has sat waiting in my drafts for as long as you all have been.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kagami started awake to a clatter of thunder. A few quick blinks cleared his hazy vision and he surveyed the scene around him. The fire had stalled out some time ago, the residual smoke of heat absent. Misty droplets pricked his skin from overhead. Through the silhouetted grove was draped a dreary azure light and he surmised that dawn was approaching, the absolute darkness of midnight lifting. He must have managed at least six hours. Seemed he hedged his predictions correctly.

Lightning blipped in the distance, strobing vibrant blue light across the backdrop of blackened mountains. He sincerely hoped the sprinkle was not a prelude to a shower. If not for the displeasure of coaxing a sleep-deprived Aomine to awaken prematurely, he did not think he could handle the man while functioning at less than half efficiency.

Speaking of, how hadn’t the thunder woken Aomine? Affinitive to the element or not, the sound was nonetheless jarring.

His muscles protested, stiff from disuse, as he wiggled against the trunk. Pressure tightened around his thigh and he recoiled, smushing his back against the tree. The Lichtenberg figure shot a wave of pain down his spine and he clenched his jaw as it passed.

He looked down. Aomine lay slumped over, head resting on Kagami’s thigh, an arm curled to lock it in place.
He grunted. At least one of them would start the morning without any cricks. Which didn’t seem fair considering the hunter was not the one scored with a debilitating scar across his back. The petulant thought to push Aomine off crossed his mind and he raised a hand with intent to do so. Until he caught the flaking gauze pad on the man’s forehead.

Aomine had been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours. He doubted that he’d had a moment of peace since their encounter at the fort. Then he thought. Maybe pretending he hadn’t found Aomine in a moment of weakness wouldn’t be the worst thing he did for him.

With what little mobility he had, he fitted his spine comfortably against the tree, dropped his arms into his lap, and closed his eyes.

Consciousness was slowly returning to him, provoked by a gentle touch to his shoulder. A pulsating ache fogged his brain. Soreness gripped his injured knee, shoulders, and neck. A muffled voice crept to his ears and he groaned defiantly, giving a meek push to the fingers nudging him. If Aomine was trying to wake him for anything short of mortal danger, he’d throttle him.

“Sir,” the voice whispered. “Please don’t make me shake you awake. I don’t think your friend would appreciate it.”

The English, accompanied by a faint lisp and spoken in a tone too soft to be Aomine’s startled him awake. His senses fired alert and he threw one arm over the still sleeping hunter. The other reached for the **kodachi**.

“Whoa, whoa.”

Kagami squeezed the grip, the blade halfway exposed. He studied the speaker. Crouched beside him, positioned arm’s length away, was a fair-skinned man with a head of disheveled blond hair and amber eyes that somehow caught light in the gloom of an overcast dawn. From thin shoulders hung an open olive drab vest, pocket edgings chapped from repeated washings. Tarnished boots clawed from bark and rock hugged the feet and hacked cargos frayed above the knees.

He’d also noticed a military issue belt. And dangling from the right hip was a knife holster. This man was a hunter. No handle protruded from the leather casing. So where was the weapon?

His scrutiny did not go unnoticed and the man jerked a finger over his shoulder. “Right over there.”

A field knife no longer than ten inches with reverse serrated teeth impaled the soil beyond the tripwire barrier. Whoever this man was he clearly wanted to illustrate himself as friendly. But Kagami was not going to drop his guard that easily. Keeping his blade in the stranger’s sight, he asked, in English, “Who are you?”

He assumed he and Aomine still resided in Nise, the Ice Nation’s primary settlement since the Fire and Lightning landlocked them more than two thousand years ago when they allied and became the Rus-Ainu. Which gave him less of a reason to trust this newcomer. Blond hair and xanthic eyes, while a perpetuated stereotype, were a trait of the Lightning Apparitions. Zhestokiy’s border was reachable in a day’s ride on horseback from Goryokaku. And no different than their fiery allies did the Lightning clarify their disrespect of their neighbor’s boundary lines. He wouldn’t put it past a handful of derelict Apparitions to trespass the border just to enforce the national dogma. Was this man one of them?

Blondie propped his chin on his palm and gave a disarming smile. “I’m a hunter. Like you and
your dozing buddy.”

Dodging the question only made Kagami both more suspicious and annoyed.

“Strike one,” he made clear. “Try this then. How did you find us?”

Blondie gestured to the direction of the plateau. “A couple of my foragers were sifting for breakfast when they found you guys. Almost tripped one of your little aparatos trying to see if you were alive. Once they described you two, I had to investigate myself.”

He wasn’t certain he believed that. Was this man a border dweller come to issue a warning to leave? Unlikely. Vagrants were treated with sniping contempt by locals and chased out. If not herded inland to be intercepted by military patrol. This man did not seem to be doing either yet. He could not decide if the exuded congeniality was a front to otherwise despicable intentions. However Blondie had apparently understood the situation and forfeited security to a pair of strangers over himself before confronting them, going as far as to bring himself close to an unidentified person. The courtesy spoke volumes but he deferred appreciation. And would continue to until this man revealed himself.

“What do you want with us?” he asked. “Why not scour around us?”

Blondie waved a finger between him and Aomine. “You two are pretty smashed up. Thought I’d show some of that bumpkin hospitality and take in a pair of stragglers.”

“A awful trusting from one stranger to another, fella.”

Blondie smiled again. “Oh, you’re no stranger to me.”

The declaration threw warning flags in his brain and he inched the blade further from the sheath to emphasize his displeasure.

“Notorious Neutral hunter Aomine Daiki and kid brother to Lord Akashi, Kagami Taiga.”

He spat back, “Half-brother.” Realizing he fell for the man’s bait, he scowled.

Blondie chuckled and stood slowly.

“My camp is just a short jaunt from here. Down in the valley. We’ve enough food and medical supplies to spare.”

Kagami appraised him with a tentative stare. The prospect of medication and possibility of a meal was tempting.

Blondie raised his hands in compromise. “Tell you what, amigo. Since your buddy seems content recharging, I’ll take point and if you decide to put that blade between you and I, I wouldn’t be offended.”

Allowing himself to become a hostage so easily at least diverted control of the situation in Kagami’s favor. Clearly this man had experience diffusing sensitive situations. He dropped his eyes to Aomine who had not budged the entire time. He needed treatment just as gravely, if not more than Kagami. Putting a hot meal in the hunter’s belly may make him more agreeable, too.

He freed his weapon and stuck it beside him, cutting a tight look at Blondie.

“Stay where I can see you.”
The man took a few steps back, arms placed behind the head in surrender. Compliance, so far, was not proving a problem. So he detached Aomine’s arm from his leg and cradled the hunter’s head as he moved to kneel. Cursory glances showed that Blondie maintained his promised innocence, merely watching in silence as Kagami propped Aomine against the tree. He positioned himself in front of the hunter, secured lanky arms around his neck at the wrists, and slowly leveraged the sleeping man onto his back. Apart from a few disapproving grunts, Aomine remained still. When he’d hooked one leg, Kagami palmed the *kodachi* and brought the grip between his teeth, then secured the other leg.

He rose, fitting Aomine snuggly to his back with a bump. The added weight tore at his knee but he ignored the strain.

“Supposed I can’t take my knife back?” Blondie asked.

Kagami threw his head in command to lead the way.

Blondie flashed his teeth. “I’ll ask one of the children to come back for it later.” He turned and started walking, stepping over a tripwire, towards the plateau. “This way.”

Kagami followed.

He’d hoped to keep his blade at the ready but somehow throwing down one of Aomine’s legs beat dropping the hunter from his shoulder if retaliation became necessary. He’d had no choice but to piggyback the man. Had he draped the man over his shoulder, blood would have rushed to his head and likely woken Aomine sooner than Kagami would have liked. The situation with this stranger had yet to escalate and so long as he decided the man was nonthreatening, he wouldn’t have to worry about diffusing a violent confrontation once Aomine awoke. He’d sooner listen to Kagami if he was both informed and calm than he would have last night.

Or so he hoped.

─

Aomine awoke to an unusual sound. At first he’d thought the ponderous weight of fatigue and adrenaline had numbed his body, allowing him to sleep on such uncomfortable terrain without added irritation. Then he went to roll onto his back as his sleep-addled brain unfogged. There was no resistance of the burly pine or rustle of underbrush beneath him. Rather the crinkle of a cot. His senses fired to life and he sprang upright.

Had Susa found him and Kagami?

Were they captured?

Then, Kagami’s voice said, “Yo.”

Just a few feet away, in a chair turned around, sat Kagami, arms draped over the top rail. A pale cotton shirt with a vented collar covered his chest. Tattered trousers splattered with what looked like plaster hung a few inches above the prince’s hiking boots. Not exactly prison garb, but nonetheless a divested man.

He cleared his throat and asked him, “What happened?”
Kagami gripped the back of his neck, definitely still sore from the pummeling it took in the Water Room. “It’s a long story.”

“Stop evading and answer me.”

Kagami sent him an annoyed look. “Your regalia privileges don’t come into effect until your second week.”

Aomine tossed the blanket off and moved to throw his legs over the cot. Pain lanced his waist and he froze, dropping back to the canvas on his elbow.

“I was trying to be delicate.”

He lifted the unfamiliar tank top he sported. The burn, last tended by Satsuki yesterday and then subsequently unraveled and ignored a few hours later by Aomine, had been redressed.

He sighed heavy through his tightened jaw and covered the bindings. “I’m fed up with people skirting around me claiming to be delicate.” He looked at Kagami and noticed the blemish of a gnarly bruise dusting his forehead.

Kagami appeared unruffled. “We were picked up by someone while you were sleeping. Some foragers in the area.” He added with a shrug, “Nearby villagers or something.”

Not an uncommon occurrence. Country dwellers squatting borderlines could be the most hospitable people. Or the most vicious.

“On whose side of the fence?”

“He didn’t—or wouldn’t—say.”

He wondered about the correction but decided not to press. The prince’s relaxed countenance assured him that their minder was benign enough to administer much needed first aid to a pair of strangers meandering the wilderness. However over the last twenty-four hours he had come to learn that even the most trustworthy people carried insurance at their belt. What had Imayoshi said?

Trust without cynicism is hollow.

He was starting to understand the meaning of those words.

“You still haven’t answered me,” he made clear, becoming impatient with the runaround.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re impatient?”

“You want me to reopen that lip?”

The air intensified, charged with hostility that neither obviously wanted to act on. Silence held them for a moment as the tension deflated. Adversity would get them nowhere and they both realized that. Slowly he straightened, sitting on the edge of the cot, doing his best not to crunch his waist.

He pointed. “What’s with the get-up?”

“Compliments of our host.” Kagami nodded his head toward the flimsy door. “Our gear is out on the clothesline.”
He plucked at the strap of his tank top. Kagami seemed to catch his drift.

“I don’t go below the belt on the,”—he paused, eyes rolling to the tent canopy as if searching for the appropriate word—“whatever date this is. The rest of it is at the end there.”

Kagami gestured and he spotted a pair of clean boxer shorts and slate trousers. Why not leave him as he lie and let him dress himself? The realization dawned on him and he withheld a scowl. He shifted his gaze back to the prince.

Before he could speak, Kagami said, “Don’t.”

Perhaps a few days ago, before the avalanche of a century-old life-shattering lie came crashing down on him, he may have quipped something clever. The prince must have realized the stigmatic ramifications of his indiscretion. But had yet to apologize for wounding him. Not that Aomine intended to forgive or accept an admission. Hiding the evidence merely exposed the depth of the man’s shame. And rather than displaying a sense of propriety he withdrew.

Again the air soured and Kagami resigned to surveying their quarters. It appeared he was still unwilling to reveal the reason behind their displacement or who their minder was. Which irritated him more. That seemed to be the man’s chief effect on him.

The door, a few slabs of plywood mounted together, swung open. In walked a tall man with pulled back mussy blond hair and skin dusted with a liking to sunlight. A silver loop earring curled the left earlobe. Through a long vent of a tunic he spied the glimmer of a pendant dangling from a hemp cord.

Kagami immediately addressed the man, tone restrained. “Not to sound ungrateful,” he said, in English, “but you said you’d be back over an hour ago.”

The man simpered, flashing leather work-gloved hands, rambling back a response. More English, this time tinged with a nasal lisp. Was this the forager Kagami spoke of?

The agitation on the prince’s face melted and he rubbed his neck, gaze falling.

The stranger regarded Aomine, tipping a congenial smile and offering a wave. A tight air squeezed him and he suddenly felt cagey and vulnerable. The skin of his neck and shoulders pricked as electric hairs that he was rapidly becoming accustomed to threatened to betray him. Something about this man was off-putting and he did not like how it was affecting him.

“Hope you don’t mind.” The man pointed a leathered finger at Aomine’s stomach. “It was hard to notice since your shirt was black but once I saw it, I couldn’t leave it to get infected.”

The barrage of slanted English, spoken quickly, overwhelmed him. Subconsciously, his hand slid over his belly, as if barring the burn from view. What was this man talking about? Remembering that Kagami was versed in the incorrigible language, he found the prince’s stare. The tight screw of his brow must have telegraphed his annoyance because Kagami cleared his throat, earning the stranger’s attention. With a hand upon his hip, the man responded with a chipper hum. The squeezing air became more distinct like flies orbiting an attractive morsel and he willed himself not to react.

“He doesn’t understand English,” the prince said, pointing a finger at Aomine.

The man flitted a glance between him and Kagami, then spoke again to Kagami.

Kagami shrugged and mumbled a reply.
He tired of the bandy and shot up from the cot. “Someone tell me what’s going on here,” he barked, disregarding propriety to the stranger’s hospitality.

The man fingered the cord around his neck and stroked it, flashing a smile that was all teeth. Crinkled eyes portrayed an innocence that, combined with the pestering affect, disarmed him. He could not get a read on this man, which only served to unnerve him further.

Their minder pointed to him while speaking to Kagami, then gave another wave and left.

He didn’t give the door a chance to ease closed before he probed the prince with a hard look and asked, “What the hell was that about? Who is that?”

Kagami stood from the chair, flipped it around, and shoved it under the table across from the cot.

“Get your pants on,” he said in Japanese, with a traceable amusement that Aomine could not comprehend. “Our to-be-named host wants to take us for a walk.”

Kagami crossed the tent to the door.

“What are you going?”

Kagami stopped and glanced back, the door pushed open and letting in a splash of shaded light from outside where he heard the faint bungle of busied people. He gave Aomine a onceover. Then, he smirked and said, “You’re a big boy. Pants go on one leg at a time, don’t they?”

The door slapped shut behind him.

The host, who had yet to introduce himself, took them on a quiet stroll through an encampment. Canvas tents, like the one he had awoken in, plotted a gently sloping knoll, forming a figure eight footpath that had not yet been balded. Smoke billowed from a tin chimney chute beyond the olive drab peaks and the smell of roasting garlic and onions assaulted his nose. A horde of children stampeded by, screaming to each other in another language he did not understand. He studied the surrounding geography as they circuited the camp and came to realize that they were within the valley between the plateau and the mountain range. Probably no more than an hour away from Goryokaku. Maybe two, he couldn’t be certain.

While the man and Kagami prattled on in English, he thought back to Satsuki. A horrid conclusion curled his gut tight. She was not yet aware of his partner’s fate. What if she found the corpse? Would she venture after Imayoshi as well to exact vengeance? He’d meant to have that dinner with them both before he discovered the affinity of his hidden power in the bath. But he understood that the sentiment was more than just an apology for inconveniencing Tetsu and misleading Satsuki about his malady. The years he had spent watching the two of them together, noticing an obvious but restricted relationship. At first he merely thought it an attraction of intellect, both of them of the cerebral brood. Hostilities had thawed and breaching of personal space became acceptable. Then came gentle passing touches and late night conversations overheard while they believed him asleep.

Satsuki’s interest had been easier to detect but he had not the right to approach her. They were long divorced and who she pursued romantic endeavors with was her business. She, like himself, was a physical creature. Inclined to give and expect contact. Tetsu was stringent about his boundaries and he’d long stewed about the probability of a relationship between them. If she could accept being brushed away and surrender to Tetsu’s sensitivities.
An afternoon in the fifth temple garden, a terraced courtyard margined by a covered walkway leading to the chapel, convinced him that, perhaps, it was possible. He had been searching for Satsuki at Imayoshi’s request and spotted her and Tetsu on a stone bench beneath a date tree. Hugging a support beam on the walk, he watched. Both had held books. Satsuki had gradually closed the gap between them, Tetsu acknowledging the shift with a chaste smile. He’d then nudged her, the hand on his knee open in invitation. Without hesitation, and with a smile, she’d folded their fingers together and dropped her head to his shoulder. All performed without deviating from their pages and resumed completely unabashed.

For nearly twenty-five years they had kept up the charade. Tiptoeing the line between friends and lovers but never crossing it. And he knew exactly why. His thumb stroked the band wrapping his left ring finger. It was him. They felt responsible for his happiness. The idiots. What about their own satisfaction? He’d wanted to confront the issue over dinner with them. To insist that his welfare was best decided by himself. To give them his acceptance. His blessing to begin their own lives apart from him. That seemed no longer possible and that he had kept silent all these years burdened his heart with shame.

Emotion stung his eyes. He squashed the feeling and when he lowered his hand he noticed that the volume of people around them had increased. The tent housings had thinned, the path dumping them onto what appeared to be a picnic ground. A series of collapsible tables were lined with plates, hallowed gourds, and bowls loaded with steaming food. Bread loaves lay in a clumsy heap at the end of the procession. Apples and pears were being plucked from a pail by a group of children. He slowed upon the scene as he studied the throng. Kagami likewise halted.

Black hair topped every head, from infant to senior. The fruit-pickers skipped past them and as they cast him a curious look, he noted the irises. Stark black.

He shot a look to Kagami. Consternation tugged the prince’s features and he swept his gaze around the clearing.

Their host was still ambling along, not having realized his guests were awestricken.

Aomine trotted ahead and grabbed the man’s shoulder, spinning him around. Rings of yellow-gold probed him for a response. Something about this stranger warned him to be wary. But he’d been dodged long enough and he wanted answers.

Cushioned footfalls announced Kagami’s approach as he motioned around him and asked the man, “What is all this?”

The man’s lips pursed, brows pinched in a sort of curious amusement. Yet he said nothing. Aomine groaned, remembering that English was the desired vehicle of communication. He turned to Kagami and was about to ask for assistance when the man interrupted.

“I see you noticed something peculiarly common with the people here.”

Kagami cut in for him, speaking their host’s preferred tongue. “I didn’t want to jump the gun alone,”—he jabbed a thumb at Aomine—“but he picked up on it, too. So tell us. This is a Neutral camp, isn’t it?”

The man merely smiled, a small acknowledging tug of the lips. He did not need Kagami to fill him in. He scanned the varicolored faces around them. More of the passersby had paused to observe them, gesturing and speaking quietly as children queried and parents and elders contained their curiosities. His body tightened, suddenly feeling defensive under the scrutiny of so many Neutrals.
He clenched his fists to quash the rise of electricity tickling his nerves. He did not want to distinguish himself a threat or expose his nature. A side glance to Kagami showed the prince was likewise buckling his flames. Disregarding that he would not be understood, he stepped closer to the stranger and asked, “Why the hell did you bring us here?”

Kagami mumbled the inquiry and the man homed his attention on a clutch of Neutrals. A little girl stood barred in a woman’s arms, shyly peering through bulging sleeves. The man beckoned the child over and after a second of conferment, the child scampered over. As she drew near, Aomine noticed cloudiness to one of the eyes and a deep scar pitting the girl’s cheek. The child magnetized to their host’s leg and the man scratched his fingers through the girl’s frizzy hair. The encouragement persuaded the child to peer around at Aomine and Kagami.

“For you to understand just how harmed and misunderstood these people are.” The man’s eyes narrowed a fraction. “Because of killers like you.”

Kagami whispered the man’s words to him, his tone tight.

Aomine glared at their host. “What do you plan to do? Adopt all of them? No nation wants them. That’s why they are hunted.” He fought the impulse to meet the milky eye leering at him. “They are not Apparitions and they cannot produce any more.”

The man’s laugh that followed Kagami’s interpretation had them both recoiling. Just what about the declaration was funny? The man crouched to the child and while they muttered to each other in an incomprehensible language, he stepped close to Kagami and nudged him.

“I don’t like this.”

The prince scoffed. “You think I like being called a killer?”

“He knows what we do and we still don’t know who he is. Are you absolutely positive he didn’t give you a name?”

Kagami cut him a dry look. He understood the message. Do I look like an idiot?

He cocked a brow. “Right now? Yes.”

Kagami ignored the jab. “Factoring out that everyone else in this place is powerless, one against two ain’t bad odds.”

Aomine rubbed his forehead, feeling a new gauze patch taped above his brow. “Wishin’ I was still in that cave.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

He elbowed him. “At least with Nebuya I knew my chances.”

“With Nebuya, you’d be dead,” Kagami hissed, eyes glinting with insult. “Now shut up.”

The child scurried back to the woman and their host stood. Aomine steeled himself, unappreciative of the bothersome effect this character was having on him, but prepared to defend himself, if necessary.

The man faced them. Then zeroed in on Aomine and spoke in more of that lisp-hinted English, flattening one hand over his chest.
Unable to comprehend, he looked to Kagami for understanding only to see disbelief had blown the prince’s eyes wide.

“No fucking way,” he breathed in Japanese.

“What?” Aomine probed.

Surprise held the prince’s tongue.

He grabbed and squeezed his arm, giving a tug. “What’d he say?”

Kagami’s eyes remained on the stranger and he regained control of himself. “He said you’re lying.”

“I’ve read every book on Neutrals at Goryokaku. Each one says the same thing. Neutrals cannot reproduce a functional Apparition.”

Kagami finally looked at him. “He said his mother was a Neutral.”

He could not believe what he was hearing. He searched the prince’s face for a hint of fallacy but nary a shadow of doubt betrayed the incredulity knotting the man’s frayed brows. He found the stranger’s gaze upon them, magnified by a benevolent light to his eyes. Then a grin and a shrug.

“How the hell is that possible?”

Chapter End Notes

In Chapter XXIX, I corrected an error made while editing, where in I had written that Aomine was older than Kagami. I have corrected this.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

He steeled himself with a sharp inhale and said, “How many?”

She gingerly brought both of his bandaged hands into hers and stared at him with a confidence he could tell was taxing to maintain.

“I’m sorry, Tetsu-kun.”

Chapter Notes

(This chapter embarrasses me, I'm not going to bother lying about it.)

Life hasn't gotten much better which has obviously affected my ability to finish this story. My house was ripped up and gutted on the inside, so I was living with my family in my grandmother's house for a month. I started a new job that's done a great job of stressing me out and making me fear for job security. My brother-in-law and I are lowkey fighting. (Imagine male alley cats, that's us, rn) We're back in the house now but it's all upturned and I can't use my desk until I buy a new chair for it, so I've been working slowly after work for a few hours a night to move this story along.

I am continuing to work on it, in increments. A lot of the last few months was devoted to further developing the Apparition species from the story. I hope I get the chance to share it.

I can only apologize for the delay and hope the end of this story reaches you all soon. (u _ u)

The world slowly filtered back to Kuroko. He dared not open his eyes, detecting brightness beyond that he was not yet ready to adjust to. His perceptions awakened and he recognized a tingling sensation exploding within his fingers and toes. One side effect of the temple’s primary muscle relaxant, he recalled. A dull throbbing radiated from his throat but he still retained the ability to swallow without compromise. Which only reasserted what had happened.

He somehow—miraculously—survived Imayoshi’s attempted electrocution. A feat he did not accomplish alone. The rippled memory of a pink blob and soothing waft of lilac reminded him that Momoi had come to his aid. He had not meant to involve her but witnessing her brazen intrusion into the Dan’s private office to save him had only reaffirmed his adoration for this woman.

He brought a hand to his face, covering one eye with cotton-wrapped fingers while opening the other. The trick was taught to every Shadow Apparition as creatures that routinely traveled between sunlight and absolute darkness. Photoreceptors were sensitive bodies and the standard ocular transition between light magnitude extremes could take up to twenty-five minutes. Maintaining adaption to one eyes eased adjustment for the other. Fortunately the overhead halogen fixtures were extinguished, a tepid glow distending from beyond.
A few moments more and both eyes were clear. He lowered his hand. A joisted ceiling loomed overhead. The caustic perfume of disinfectant and antiseptic blended with eucalyptus and he scrunched his nose at the odor. How could the nursing staff tolerate the smell?

His gaze searched the cell. Early in the temple’s history, partitions had not divided patients. The rise of contagious aerial illnesses quickly revised medical protocol, both reducing the risk of contamination and affording beleaguered Apparitions much desired solitude. Positioned beside the entryway stood an oak cupboard that stored bedding, sanitary towels, and gowns. Two unfinished chairs rested on the far wall to seat visitors. A smudge of pink fell into the edge of his sight and he darted his eyes to it.

To his left, Momoi was slumped over onto his cot, head resting on a tucked arm. The other draped across his waist as if she had fallen asleep tucking him in. It was such scant pressure that he hadn’t even registered her presence. Had she been with him the whole night? The hazy light trickling in from a rectangular window over the cot told him morning had come and that she very well may have.

He brought a hand close to her face and brushed aside a lock of hair from her forehead. Beneath sleek lashes he noticed eyelids scratched with worry and unrest. A ghostly wrinkle creased her brow and he thumbed the line away. She remained unaware to his touch and for the moment, he persisted with the intrusion. He traced the gentle slope of a thin eyebrow, gliding his bound knuckles across her cheek. He delved into the tresses of her silky hair and curled a bundle between his thumb and partially-wrapped forefinger. He’d always liked the color. A riveting shade that betrayed the woman’s imperceptible intelligence. He slid the strands through his fingers, hand drawing toward his chest.

The weak shimmer from her finger captured his attention and he released the hairs.

Her wedding ring. Adorned by Aomine fifty years ago.

It glared back at him, weighed with implications of their surreptitious relationship. A tumultuous emotional melee. Not just for him. He knew Momoi suffered from their secrecy as well. How could she not? He had only arrived during the final phase of their marriage, but as he was immersed into his partner’s life he came to understand how deep Aomine and Momoi’s relationship went. Even once they’d lived apart. Their union was epitomized by the uninterrupted connection of emotional comfort and physical closeness. Something that, Kuroko had dreaded as his feelings became clear, he could not wholly provide her. He knew she acknowledged his orientation, his preference to limit closeness for his detachment to sexual intimacy. It was the guideline that dictated their over twenty-year long fling.

And he hated himself for it.

Many times she had proposed advancing their experiences. Shallow introductions, but he’d always stonewalled her. Not knowing how his body would react and worried that he would disappoint her. Because he was not Aomine. He could not give her what he knew she wanted. He could not explore the unknown beyond what they had established for themselves. One Momoi had breached yesterday when she kissed him in the washroom.

At the time he had been consumed with his mission. The consequences of his misstep skulked across his brain, escaping examination until now. When they decided to indulge their growing feelings, they agreed together that ensuring Aomine’s happiness was their primary objective. Then Momoi had acted, adding a new step into the elaborate dance they had spent many years executing.
He had to improvise and ensure that it did not happen again. It couldn’t. So long as he wished for Aomine’s happiness.

He vented a deep sigh through his nose to clear his jumbled thoughts. Momoi stirred. She met his stare and her tired eyes came alight.

“Tetsu-kun,” she said, lifting herself from the cot. “Thank goodness.”

He greeted her with a slight tip of his head, feeling tightness around his neck that he hadn’t noticed before. Perhaps she was not able to remove the electric collar, even surgically. She shifted to sit on the cot and produced a penlight from her smock. She rattled off perfunctory questions as she performed a brief examination. Probing his retinas, determining motor function, ascertaining veritable nerve sensation. He reported pain only in his fingers and throat, which he knew was to be expected. The details seemed to satisfy her.

She stowed the penlight and he noted she wasn’t wearing medical scrubs. A periwinkle knitted pullover with ballooning sleeves hung long over a billowing skirt. Studded bangles jostled as she penned his progress upon a clipboard on her lap. While she tested his pulse, he noticed her legs were bare. No matter the season, she always sported stockings. Probably from years of conforming to a professional clerical worker dress code, he surmised. She released his wrist and scribbled on the sheet.

“Can you sit up for me?”

“We’ll have to try, won’t we,” he said, voice raspy.

She dropped the clipboard to the floor and stooped to assist him. Through the stubby legs of the stool she’d been sitting on, he spied her signature Oxfords with the missing hosiery spilled over them. So she had been with him all night.

Once he was comfortably elevated, she returned to the stool.

He wanted to assess the damage done by the contraption but knew his voice was still raw. So he forced a long swallow to relax his airway and asked slowly, “How bad was it?”

She seemed to understand which of the two evils he meant, leaning forward to engage him.

“Surgery was necessary to detach the battery pack and melded steel. The physician is certain that sweat allowed the conductor to overheat but from the remnants, we learned that the discharge exceeded what we would consider to be,” she paused and her nose crinkled, “humane.”

He related her spite. Even as a prisoner he thought the use of a high-voltage collar with steel probes to be excessive.

“I’m sorry to say,” she rubbed her eyes, “there was extensive deep tissue damage as a result of the electrocution.”

He wondered how she and the physician managed treatment around the collar when he could barely squeeze his fingers between his skin and the leather.

So he asked, “When will you be able to remove it?” If it was even possible. He remembered his futile efforts to expose a weakness on the device during the first few months of wear. A special key was required and Imayoshi—not Aomine—possessed it.

Momoi rose from the stool and rounded to the foot of the cot where he knew the infirmary
appointed a trunk to store the patient’s belongings. She dipped into the chest and shielded an item behind the frills of her skirt as she returned to her seat. For a moment she hesitated, then brought the collar into view. He could not believe what he was seeing. She noticed his amazement and flayed the strap open so he could see the inside. Several of the spikes remained intact, their chrome shine blackened with heat. Scorched leather retreated from the exposed panel of the battery pack strategically tacked to the locking mechanism to reduce weight and bulk. The plastic casing was mostly eaten away, the inside a mangled heap of melted wires and corroded metal. He eyed the severance. A clean cut just shy of the lock.

“Bolt cutters,” she provided, turning the collar to display the cut. “We tried a scalpel to be delicate but the conductive wire tacking the charge to the spikes was impregnable.”

He was impressed.

“How did you come into bolt cutters?” The hunters possibly?

She dropped the infernal thing to the floor and crossed her ankles. “They were actually rib cutters. I didn’t want to startle you.”

He could not help the smile that creased his mouth. “Hardly.” Though the thought of either of those things near his throat was unnerving.

She smiled back.

Relief numbed the swirl of worry that had been sloshing his gut. But the ordeal had left him with more than just a fried neck. He recalled the shredding pain that tore through his fingers as she freed his grip on the collar in the Dan’s office. Momoi had said that the electrical discharge was powerful enough to melt both a layer of plastic and leather. Meaning his flesh stood no chance.

He resisted the temptation to look at his hands, tipped his gaze to the ceiling.

“What of my hands?”

Momoi’s elation faded. Her silence only reassured him of the worst. When he’d reacted to Imayoshi activating the collar, he knew that there was a risk of injury to his hands between a damp neck and electrically charged metal. As an assassin he had been tutored in the various methods of information extraction. While not in an ethereal or impenetrable form, an Apparition’s skin was just as susceptible to pain as a human’s. And he had seen many a captured prisoner subjected to multiple electrocutions to attain sensitive information. He recalled the gruesome carnage of the wounds of even second degree cases. Boils bubbled from infuriated skin. Corroded flesh recoiled to reveal bleeding capillaries. Then there was the extreme degree.

The third degree. Total, irreversible damage to the skin. Severed nerve function. Possible exposure of underlying tendons and bones. Necrotic consumption of flesh, as Izuki had once said.

He was grateful he could not feel what he knew would be agonizing pain in his fingers. But that meant he was either maxed out on morphine—another bend of the temple’s orthodox approach to scientific evolution—or he’d lost the use of his hands forever.

He knew she didn’t want to answer but he needed to know. She was staring at the clipboard, eyes still and bottom lip tucked between her teeth. He steeled himself with a sharp inhale and said, “How many?”

She flicked her eyes to meet his, then to his hands, one lying at his side, the other draped across his stomach. He saw her struggling to compartmentalize her position as both his attending nurse and
his friend. As she silently warred with herself, he wondered if disclosing bad news came this
difficulty for her with other patients. Finally she reached out, sliding her narrow fingers over his
right hand, the one over his stomach. Her gaze climbed slowly, her anxious eyes fighting to
suppress the emotion he knew she did not want to display. As a professional.

“I’m not a physician.”

Another way of saying I cannot legally diagnose you. A failsafe against indicting a nurse for
impersonating a doctor. A serious offense within the Ice Apparition sphere of medicine.
Punishments ranged from a jail sentence to manual labor within one of Nise’s exclaves to
expropriation and confiscation of material and monetary assets to the flurry—a form of execution
intrinsic to the Ice. The accused, ensconced in a shell of their own ice, were ravaged with hammers
and axes by either public onlookers or a privately appointed executioner, until all that remained
were shards and splinters. The debris was then showered in salt, dissolving the essence of the
criminal. He had no intention of sentencing her to such a barbaric fate, which she knew.

He decided to make clear, “Nor am I a citizen of Nise.”

Meaning he had no legal protection or privileges against malpractice. A sentiment that threatened
to break the thin line she’d pursed her lips into.

“Please.”

Again she looked to the clipboard. Then she straightened her back, tucked the pen behind her ear,
and scooted onto the cot, facing him. She gingerly brought both of his bandaged hands into hers
and stared at him with a confidence he could tell was taxing to maintain.

“I’m sorry, Tetsu-kun.”

He swallowed, saying nothing. Was this a rejection or troubled admission?

“During the procedure you spiked a fever, so the doctor was willing to postpone it but,” her thumb
rolled across the swathed fingers of his left hand. “You will be losing your ring finger. Possibly
your pinky, as well. Some cosmetic surgery will repair superficial damage to the other fingers on
this hand.”

He held his breath, a chill swelling in his chest. Amputation? Dismemberment had always had a
nauseating effect on him, something not even Aomine was privy to. Hypocritical of him, as he
recalled his despicable stint of cruelty all those years ago. Back when he’d been possessed by
incurable grief and rage at the loss of his fictive kin. When he’d mercilessly slaughtered his targets.
Extracting maximum agony to satisfy his malevolence against Aomine. Perhaps the experience had
come back to bite him. Reminding him of his inhumane cruelty by taking his own flesh and bones.

The stroke of her fingers across the wrapping of his other hand thrust him back to the present and
he vented a hard breath. Amputation? Dismemberment had always had a
nauseating effect on him, something not even Aomine was privy to. Hypocritical of him, as he
recalled his despicable stint of cruelty all those years ago. Back when he’d been possessed by
incurable grief and rage at the loss of his fictive kin. When he’d mercilessly slaughtered his targets.
Extracting maximum agony to satisfy his malevolence against Aomine. Perhaps the experience had
come back to bite him. Reminding him of his inhumane cruelty by taking his own flesh and bones.

He dropped his head back to the pillow and let the news seep in. Limited use of his fingers. At least
two definite amputations. Even though he survived the attack, Imayoshi still triumphed in the end.
And like Aomine’s burn, his disfigured digits would memorialize the victory. The realization sent
a wave of anger through him. That arrogant bastard.

He sensed that Momoi was waiting for a reaction. He soothed his tightening throat with another forced swallow.

“You’ve done all you could. I’m grateful you stayed beside me through this.” He met her eyes and, forcing a smile, said, “Thank you, Momoi-san.”

Her lips twitched as if she wanted to speak, but instead she nodded. A strained moment passed where he watched as she battled with her emotions, pointing her eyes to the ceiling to discourage tears. He wondered what she was trying so hard not to say. And why? Staunch cultural formalities were shucked once they were alone.

“I’m so happy I made it in time.” Her voice became brittle. She removed the pen from her ear and rubbed her eyes. “You’d told me to stay away from the Dan earlier that day because you suspected he was up to no good. That hadn’t stopped me from meeting with him. Had I not, we never would have learned he was conspiring with an enemy.” She sniffed, regarding him with moist, puffy eyes. “If I had come sooner—”

“This was not your fault.”

The proclamation surprised her, body tense with what may follow.

“I was hoping to checkmate the Dan. The evidence existed only in the fabrications I invented. Gestures, implications, subtle glances. Even if you had not stopped me in the hall, I would have foolishly entered without knowing Susa Yoshinori was involved.” Using his elbows, he lifted his back against the pillow, asserting himself as he added, “Ignoring my warning was the best thing you could have done for me.” A smile pulled his lips apart. “It seems Aomine-kun’s recklessness really is contagious.”

Momoi broke into a sob, shoulders hitching. She slid close and he lifted his arm to admit her. Her arms wove around his neck, head falling beside his. Her weight against his chest warmed the icy cloud left by the dread of enduring surgical dismemberment. He stroked her back and she nuzzled his cheek.

“You’re both idiots.”

“We are.”

She stifled a laugh, the vibration felt through his wrapped hand. Another sniff and she pulled back, arms sliding away. The apprehension that had gripped her face vanished, reigniting a buoyant glow. Tears had streaked her eyeliner, staining her eyelids a watery charcoal. Distinguishing her eyes from her hair, she’d once told him, both of a similar shade. Apart from her lips no other traces of product embellished her skin. No gloss adorned her mouth today, notable from how close she was. The same earlier waft of lilac, now scant, brought him comfort.

She cupped his cheek. He felt the tethers of his self-restraint loosening as she drew near. As her presence became heavy around him, the stupor of their cozy familiarity shattered.

She was going to kiss him.

For a brief moment, he’d almost lost himself. Stepped over the threshold and into uncharted territory. Momoi had toed the border yesterday but despite himself, his own desires be damned, he could not follow her. Not yet.
He wrenched back control of himself and palmed her hand.

She froze, seemingly lost in the same daze.

His heart sank as he said, “I’m sorry. But I—” He paused. This was not just about him. “No. We can’t.”

The flash of hurt that shot through her eyes pained him and he lowered her hand. He cradled it within his, lowered into his lap. Remembering that his left thumb retained unhindered mobility, he stroked her knuckles. Left unwrapped, he felt the slip of metal beneath his finger. He ignored the pang of annoyance he felt as he stated at the gleaming band.

Her fingers tensed and he risked a glance. Defeat masked her face, her unhappiness projected in the crinkle of her brow. She too, glared at the ring.

Then she sighed and he stiffened as she slipped her hand free.

“You’re right.” Her voice wilted. “I’m sorry, Tetsu-kun.”

She took a moment to collect herself, drawing a deep breath. Fingers threaded roughly through her hair and she scooped the clipboard from the floor. She stood from the cot and returned it to a peg mounted on the paneled wall behind the cot.

She swooped up her shoes and stockings. “You should get some more rest.”

He noticed the slight quiver of her tautly-pulled lips and gleam of mutinous tears in her tired eyes. And he wondered.

“Shouldn’t you, as well?”

She averted her gaze and stuffed a hand into the front pocket of her smock.

“I slept fine.”

“Or at all.”

She snapped him a challenging look.

He knew she didn’t appreciate the rebuke, so he said, “Hunching over like you had been wasn’t conducive to what you consider ‘sleeping fine’.”

“And if I was just resting my eyes?”

It seemed Aomine’s personality imprinted on her as well. Utilizing humor to evade persecution or answering a question. Even when they both knew the tactic was futile on Kuroko.

He tipped his head with a knowing smile. Finally her stiff countenance cracked and her features slackened.

“How long?” he pressed.

She hummed contemplatively and fished a watch from her pocket. A gaudy timepiece banded in flashy gold and fastened with an embroidered leather strap. He recognized it as a gift awarded to the senior nursing staff who achieved privileges of surgical assistance and personnel management. Never had the watch donned her wrist. Too garish, she’d told him.
“Once we got you into post-op, it was about 2:30 AM. I monitored you for about another hour while thumbing through other cases.” She canted her head, as if calculating. “No more than a few hours. Maybe three?”

By the ambient light spilling through the narrow window, he surmised that it was at least eight o’clock.

He breathed a laugh. What a vexing woman she was. He shifted over on the cot, mindful to use his elbows to assist the movement. Momoi stared at the empty space with a speck of hope. Then bounced her gaze between him and the cot, as if seeking permission.

The wrapping made it difficult for him to wave her over and he resented her giggle. But he gave final confirmation with a jerk of his head. She did not hesitate nor did she insist that a nurse should not lie down with a patient. Because he’d finally gotten her to shed the role.

She dropped her shoes and stocking to the floor and removed her smock, draping it over the stool. The timber frame creaked as she eased her back to the cot. She wiggled onto her side to face him, the canvas wide enough only for one average-sized person. He’d slid down the elevated pillows as he repositioned, though he still lay higher than her, and decided not to budge more than that.

She patted the pillows edging from under his head and quirked a brow. “Is this all I get?”

Leaning up on his elbow, he inspected the flimsy pillows then dropped his head to them. “Does the medical board make decisions on patient bedding?”

She did not answer him, instead laughing. He liked to see her cheerfulness returned.

“I actually had something else in mind,” he said, the inflection attracting her undivided attention.

Carefully, he freed his arm from the tight press of their bodies and drew it above his head, opening his side. She stared perplexed at the invitation, as if doubtful. For which he couldn’t blame her. Many times had they laid together but never within each other’s personal space. A head on the shoulder evolved to a head on the lap yet only a handful of times. He knew Momoi was a physical spirit, always initiating contact that exceeded mere handholding. For him to surrender himself to her was a revolutionary step. And not just for him. After all the times he’d stunted her, maintaining strict control of the boundaries of their strange relationship, he was conceding to her.

Not because he felt he needed to satisfy her.

He just wanted to make her happy.

She edged closer, as if unbelieving that she was being allowed, until she wedged herself against him. He liked that she wasn’t being advantageous of the liberty. That she moved slowly. The warmth flooding through the papery hospital gown was comfortable and he acknowledged her with a nod. He appreciated that she was mindful of the invasion, ready to back off if he signaled discomfort. Her arm, curled tight and fist tucked inward, lay between them. She passed him a look and he bobbed his head in assent.

She seemed unconvinced. So he lightly patted cotton-wound fingers over his chest and she draped her arm over his ribs.

The intrusion was something new and different but altogether enlightening. He silently evaluated himself as she dropped her head into the cradle of his chest and shoulder. No errant bodily responses. Just a slight tingle where her heat substantiated his. Like little timid fires of reassurance.
Exhaustion was clawing at his eyelids and following her example seemed the best idea.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, rested his head atop hers, and closed his eyes.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

“Let's end this, boss.”

Imayoshi grunted approval.

Then stalked inside.

Chapter Notes

This is trash. I am trash. ; A ;

I'm not entirely prepared to release this chapter but it has been sitting and waiting for almost a year (like the last few because I am scum /cries) I'm so eager to have this story completed and I script increments as often as I can but ngl I'm scared to death that my style has deviated so much during this hiatus that it'll be crap \ You've all stuck with me so long and I don't want to disappoint you guys! I feel like I owe you guys something so I edited this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something was not right.

Imayoshi and Susa stood before the magnificent façade of Casimir palace. Four-hundred feet spanned before them, all handcrafted from quarried stones and rocks. The monstrosity was commissioned by the then-Kaiser Aomine Daisuke. Construction began in 1862, while the sovereign and his sole heir resided in Jaroslav, Zhhestokiy’s original capital in the east and an even larger beast than Casimir. Several of the palace’s ground floor rooms were dedicated to entertaining guests and discussing new legislature. As a coming-of-age present to his son Daichi, Daisuke added a solar theater to nourish the boy’s love of celestial bodies and the heavens. The domed cylinder spanned two stories and unraveled to an expanse of little more than fifty thousand square feet. The palace rose to 111 feet, rays of early morning light slicing across a blue-tinged copper roof.

Clouds striated the sky and promised a reprieve of the gloom that Imayoshi and the others at Goryokaku had endured during the last week. A century-old gamble that he nearly struck out on had given him a second chance. And he planned to finish what he’d started.

But the sight before him sent his mind reeling with myriad questions.

The courtyard around them was devoid of people, unusual as the palace served not only the Kaizer and his family but legislators, attendants, students, and embarking diplomats, making it a busy center during the day. He’d sent Nebuya’s contingent out yesterday afternoon to give them ample time to arrive, subdue the staff, and capture Hayakawa. That rowdy fool would be his collateral to bargain with Akashi to nullify the overextended and unnecessary Rus-Ainu Empire. Even with his
heir, Hyuuga did not retain constitutional privileges to the throne, therein deferring succession to his second-in-command—War Administrator Hayakawa Mitsuhiro. The process by which the militant fool ascended was questionable alone, yet he’d been so favorable with the people as Daichi’s third-seat that no clamor followed his rise.

Meaning Daichi had to have arranged it. Will of a Kazier, while breathing or buried, remained law in Zhestokiy. Something he planned to eliminate with the bribery of Akashi and subsequent demise of Hayakawa.

He surveyed the scene before him. No trace of resistance marred the sterility of the courtyard. Tall fixed windows persisted an undisturbed sheen. Columns supporting the second story stood without the dents of combat. Even the entryway doors remained sealed. And what’s more, no casualties.

Not a speck of blood anywhere.

What was going on here?

Susa, who had not said a word since they arrived, stepped close and whispered, “I’m sensing sabotage.”

He agreed. Even if Nebuya had succeeded in quelling insurgency, he would make a mess of it. But did that mean his combat chief and the battalion were themselves captives? And were they within the palace? If so, who was responsible?

His brain fired through suggestions as he inched toward the steps of the portico, Susa following. Atop the platform, he sidled to the nearest pillar and flattened his spine to it. His associate likewise zipped for cover. Fifty feet ahead was a set of outward-swinging oak slabs, carved four inches thick. Encircling them like a halo was a puzzle of geometric-paned windows. The glass wall dominated, stretching almost twenty feet and providing a crisp view into the lobby. A handful of sojourns reminded him of the majesty of the polished marble staircase and how the light thrown from the glass chandelier gave the room an inviting heavenly glow.

Very Lightning-like, he’d always thought.

He peered around the alabaster column and squinted to appraise the interior. Not a blemish of movement clouded the stillness. Susa hugged the support beside him, the stone wide enough to conceal them both. He craned back to confer with Imayoshi.

“Nothing through the windows,” he said.

“Could have dragged the conflict further in.”

Possibly but not without vestigial resistance. He resisted the urge to smirk at his friend’s sarcasm. The palace’s live-ins and employees so-loved the reception area that guests were only allowed to linger for up to five minutes before being escorted elsewhere to await their appointments. He wasn’t sure whether to chalk that up to the Lightning’s persnickety disposition about lesser forms or their tenacity for order.

Imayoshi peeked once more into the distant windows then turned to Susa again. “The shadows deep enough for you to slink ahead and steal a better look?”

“Not from here with that big ass light on in there.”

The chandelier, a gift from Czar Nakatani Masaaki to Daichi, was spherical. Unconventional in design but not without reason. The brass framework was polished a sparkling gold and more than
ten thousand diamonds coated its surface. Light burned from within, bulbs mounted to strategically-placed sconces that maximized and equalized the fixture’s effervescence. An intense yellowish-white glow that rebounded off the polished marble walls, sleek mahogany banisters, and bespeckled granite floors. Like the brilliance of the sun.

Imayoshi sucked his teeth, annoyed at the problem. The megawatt shine would surely be enough if it wasn’t being counteracted by the rising sun dispersing light into the portico.

Susa clasped his shoulder and squeezed. “Sit tight.”

Then the shadow rolled around the pillar, disappearing from sight. What was he doing?

He slipped closer to the windowless expanse hemming the colonnade and looked around the edge. Six pillars, including the one he was hiding behind, stood between the steps and the doors. Susa was speed-creeping to the second, body hunched low and legs skittering fast. That was unlike the assassin to leave himself vulnerable. Was he planning to expose a trap? Or perhaps—

A thought sparked and he decided what the hell. No chance of exposure on his left, he stepped from cover and observed the procession of supports. Nothing notable stood out, so he took another step closer to the unbroken wall. Then he saw it.

The nearer the pillars drew to the towering window display, the more dominating the light of the chandelier became in the dank portico. And thus the deeper the shadows pooling beyond the columns. Susa claimed a near perfect vantage point, wherein anyone in the building approaching from the opposite side would not see him on account of the titanic twenty-foot wide entryway doors. And the shadows grew black enough for teleportation halfway ahead.

He watched his partner slip into a hairpin shadow collapsing from the third pillar as if dropping into a pitfall. A second later the man emerged from the body of the sixth pillar shadow and snuck a better look inside, leaning around the cylinder.

Susa let out a three-tone whistle, one that signaled a complication. Imayoshi forwent caution and sprinted ahead, keeping an eye on the distant windows for any incoming Apparitions. That none appeared once he darted behind the pillar with Susa made him anxious.

“What is it?” he breathed, winded from the jog. It’d been a while since he’d exerted himself.

“There’s no one anywhere. The place is deserted.”

He refused to believe that and said as much to his associate.

Susa jerked his head and stepped aside.

“Just into the War Gallery there are papers strewn about. Then crane hard into the drawing room across the way.”

Imayoshi rounded the column and did as told. The War Gallery, opening on the left of the lobby was the portraiture centerpiece of Zhestokiy’s millennial combats. Primarily war scene depictions interspersed with artistic renditions of diplomatic proceedings and photographs capturing long ago battlefields and uniformed soldiers. Just inside the Moorish archway he spotted a spill of papers. Stepping to the glass, ignoring threat of detection, he leered into the loom of the drawing room. Though unclear from where he stood, the silhouette of toppled furniture was a tip off to a hasty retreat.

He pressed close to the windows and looked into the lobby to see a smatter of hazy but copious
shoeprints, most anomalous but quite a few distinct treads patterns resembling boot soles.

Just what the hell was going on?

He whirled around and Susa stood unconcealed, face stricken solemn but concerned.

Someone had known his intentions and intervened. That much was now certain. But who?

He glanced to his friend and saw that the quandary was irritating him in equal measure.

His brain stormed with conflicting thoughts and he could feel a headache coming on. The entire operation had been smooth-running until that twerp Kuroko interloped and tainted Aomine’s obedience. Even decommissioned the little sun stain still posed an obstacle. But he refused to be satisfied that an unrevealing cursory peep meant his entire endeavor had failed. Nebuya’s contingent had to be on the premises. If not his men then the one who supplanted themselves a player in his game. And they would face indeterminable punishment.

Imayoshi turned and stalked to the doors. He tested the handleset. The lever depressed and the hinges squeaked as the slab gave an inch. Another hand curled around the brass handle and together he and Susa forced the slab out with ease.

The draft that rolled up his back and shoulders steeled his nerves to a hostile air he hadn’t felt outside. Side-eying Susa, he detected the man had felt a similar threat.

The shadow’s hand fell from the door and he gave a solid pat between Imayoshi’s shoulders.

“Let’s end this, boss.”

He grunted approval.

Then stalked inside.

Chapter End Notes

Since my last update I've been very busy with a lot of things. My new job has been throwing overtime opportunities at everyone to satisfy the summer workload and I've been taking it in fistfuls. (93 hours over the last two weeks plus an additional 30 on top of my standard 40 for this upcoming week.) I've also been busting ass to develop my apparition species. Even more, I've also been attempting to draw again (it's been so long) for the sole purpose of trying to illustrate for you guys what exactly the characters in TWCH are wearing. Drawing the KnB cast in my cattywhompus style is so intimidating @ ~@;

As always thank you and I hope my next update is soon! <3
“That same book exists in the temple repository.” Aomine turned away from the pedigree. “There’s nothing revolutionary about it.”

“And I’m sure by now you realize why.”

His gaze slowly drooped then darted back up, tentative understanding crimping his brow in uneasy wrinkles. Was this how far Imayoshi’s deception reached?

Chapter Notes

I don't know if I should be ashamed or guilted or what but it's been SOOO long since I posted a chapter and I am SO sorry for the unannounced hiatus. A lot of things came crashing down on me this year and it took all I had to hang onto this. But I AM finishing it and have been diligently working on future chapters in my off time, even with the series' conclusion. (I still haven't seen the movie yet, ugh! I'm so eager! D: ) All that I hope is that somehow I did enough proofreading to make this as seamless for you all as it was for me.

[EDIT] Due to a mindful suggestion, I've decided to couple the following updates with glossary inserts to help clear any confusion with AU-specific terminology, since it's been so long:

**NEUTRAL:** the offspring of a hybrid and purebred that possesses a normal Apparition's lifespan and biology but has no nature affinity (i.e., Fire, Lightning, Ice, etc.)

**[BLANK]-INCLINED:** a term used to indicate the nature of a hybrid, because they carry two natures instead of one (i.e., Aomine is a Lightning-Ice hybrid but he is only able to use Lightning, therefore he is a Lightning-inclined hybrid Apparition)

**ATARAXIA(N):** the name of the Wind Apparition country and a demonym of Apparitions who hail from there (i.e., Kise is a Wind Apparition, therefore he is an Ataraxian)

**ARMADURA(N):** the name of the Earth Apparition country and a demonym of Apparitions who hail from there

**GORYOKAKU:** capital of the Ice state of Shi Tudi; Aomine, Momoi, and Imayoshi live here

**HIROSAWA:** capital of the Fire state of Bokoku; Akashi and Kagami live here

**CASIMIR:** capital of the Lightning state of Pervobytnyy Les; Hyuuga and Aomine's father hail from here

**FRINGE APPARITIONS:** Apparitions of one state/country that regularly and illegally
trespass the boundaries of neighboring states/countries

RUS-AINU EMPIRE (or RUS-AINU): the partnership of the Fire and Ice originally forged in 1000 CE

XIA UNION (or XIA): the past partnership of the Fire and Ice, starting in 2000 BCE and ending in 1000 CE

MOTHER’S MERGER: the partnership of the Wind and Earth, starting in 3000 BCE and ending in 1945 CE

WOLF PACK PACT: a punitive arrangement between the Fire, Lightning, and Ice enacted in 1990 CE that forbids the three powers from launching attacks on one another; it also deconstructed the Ice’s military and defined present-day boundary lines

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hate to agree with the guy,” Kagami said, “but how can you be a Neutral offspring?”

Neutrals milled about, gathering food from the tables and occupying the felled tree trunk benches or a patch of dewy grass to enjoy their breakfast. They’d dispersed shortly after Blondie excused the child, their curiosity transforming into disinterest. The refugees may have been unbothered by them but Kagami and Aomine remained guarded. Though not for the same reason.

So far, Blondie had come off as enigmatic and hard to gauge. Kagami’s instincts told him to be reserved but ready to act. Nothing Blondie had said or done since he’d woken Kagami in the forest earlier had convinced him to lower his defenses, despite the mysterious soothing aura the man exuded.

Blondie said nothing.

A breath of wind skirted by.

Aomine sucked his teeth. “Stop dicking around. Answer the question.”

The draft swept through again then lashed their legs. Both men sprung back a step. The flurry persisted, spiraling around Blondie in an orderly yet listless whirlwind.

Then Kagami understood. Why their host’s presence proved to be more of a bother to Aomine than himself, provoking the hunter to be cagey and hostile without any recognizable cause. Blondie’s warm skin, light hair, and amber eyes leaned more towards the criteria satisfying the Lightning’s stereotypical physical characteristics. When he’d first studied Blondie in the forest he hadn’t thought to assume the man was anything but a Lightning Apparition. Based on their trajectory when riding away from Goryokaku, they would have landed somewhere either south of, or just within, the Lightning border. Fringe Apparitions, here and in the west, filtered through the national boundaries constantly. No wonder Blondie’s appearance went unexamined. Which raised the question.

What was a Wind Apparition doing so far away from home?

He pinned Blondie with a glare, whose face remained passive.

“I’m not asking a second time.” He stepped forward and jerked a thumb at Aomine. “Your breezes
can floor him but you can’t overwhelm me. Now, who the hell are you?”

The man appraised them cautiously, as if weighing his options. After a moment the current dissipated and he sighed.

“Call me Kise.” He looked to Kagami. “And before you light up, I have proof of my claim.”

Without allowing Kagami to interpret, Kise started walking. Aomine backed away as their host strode between them toward the path leading to the tents. Repelled by the oozing effect, if he had to guess. Every Apparition species boasted a unique and innate physiological property that set them apart from each other. The Wind’s idiosyncrasy required their bodies to continuously exhaust converted carbon dioxide and nitrogenous waste from their pores. Experiencing the sensation varied from one receiving individual to another. For instance, Fire Apparitions like Kagami felt ghostly fingertips stroking along his skin, provoking an invigorating stimulus. But Lightning Apparitions described the proximity analogous to a violent bee swarm.

Aomine’s vehement avoidance certainly concluded that.

Kise gestured a gloved hand over his shoulder, not looking back. “This way.”

Kagami and Aomine stared at the sheet laid out before them. Kise did not disturb them but Kagami knew he was watching them. Studying their faces. Reading their eyes.

They’d retraced their steps to the man’s tent, bypassing busied Neutrals, children at play, and a sentinel with a pair of jackals in tow. Once ensconced inside, subpar lighting provided by an oil lantern, Kise produced and spread a long roll of parchment across the table. They had helped him pin the sheet open. Slightly yellowed but still in good condition and handwritten, older inks already faded. Intricately woven coils, glittering with flakes of gold, jade, and turquoise, bordered the lines of script. Kise had then leaned against the table, hand upon his hip, and said nothing.

Where he remained. Waiting.

Kagami’s eyes traced the page, the second family pedigree he’d examined this week. Personally-penned signatures, accented by color-coded smudges, interconnected by lines of inheritance and relationship. Similar to the Aomine family registry if but for one thing. No family crest headlined this certificate. Instead, a disclaimer at the bottom center, beyond the border, proclaimed the document’s authenticity with the official government seal of the Wind Republic. Within the verbiage, Kagami caught the target family’s name. Kise.

Hard to argue with the second best thing to an original.

Silence dragged on. Apparently too long for Kise’s liking.

“My mother’s father was a hybrid,” he said, pointing to his maternal grandfather, marked with a blue and green dab indicating Ice-Wind hybridism. The grandmother pureblooded Earth, with a solid orange dot. The Rus-Ainu believed these species inferior and in a battle of genetic superiority, they’d be right. But amongst each other, the balance of power was not easily decided. Wind surpassed Earth but was scotched by Ice. Three natures duking it out to achieve succession in a contest where only two could prevail—one dominant, the other submissive.

He continued. “It was him who convinced her to carry out her pregnancy believing it didn’t matter one way or the other what my breed would be. Back then there was little interest in pursuing scientific research into Neutrals and public opinion became quickly slanted once the Rus-Ainu
opened the flood gates, enacting laws that convicted rather than protected them. For years, parents and guardians have spread misinformation that their children were born sterile because they could not activate their natures. Scientists pounced on the chance to examine the defective and their immature procedures cost many young their lives. Countless flawed projects and theorems made the decision easy for lawmakers to declare the single largest fallacy to echo the Apparition world.”

A pause, as if expecting Kagami or Aomine to retort. Neither did, their attention riveted to the pedigree.

“That Neutrals are genetic waste and better off dead.”

Though the words carried no edge, Kagami cut the man a glare. Aomine was similarly affronted.

Kise’s expression did not alter, giving way to nothing. He edged closer, his tabled hand sliding along the page, partially obstructing one of the descendents. His gaze hardened.

“My mother took a huge leap of faith,” Kise said, “to convince a world that readily accepted that her life was worth nothing that she had value. That every Neutral deserves to live. I am an example of a truth your governments refuse to take accountability for.”

Kagami stood his ground, shoulders squared. “You can’t honestly expect anyone to believe that.”

“Based on your initial reaction, it seems it’s convinced you.”

Kagami’s lip curled snidely and he jabbed a finger at the pedigree.

“Family ties and nature inheritance is all those things are meant to prove. Not reproductive capabilities.”

“What happened to her?”

Kagami and Kise regarded Aomine, who was still staring at the page. It was the first he’d spoken since they left the picnic ground. The script was too wispy for Kagami to make sense of it but the black smudge indicating the signer’s nature was enough clarification. Kise’s Neutral mother.

Kagami muttered the question in English.

No surprise or insult claimed Kise’s face as he responded flatly, “She’s dead.”

Aomine cringed as Kagami grunted the translation. What Kise hadn’t said resonated like white noise. *Because of hunters like you.*

“Neutral stigmatization stemmed from you,” Kise said. “Your neighbors, your coworkers, straight up the ladder to your leaders. Remaining ignorant to the irreparable consequences of those falsehoods you blindly accept as fact does not excuse you from your misdeeds.”

Kagami struggled to cage his emotions.

Which seemed to fuel Kise’s onslaught as he continued on to say, “From birth Neutrals are born defective. It’s all there in their DNA. But as a lock cannot be opened without a key, Neutrals cannot pull upon their suspended natures. Without these affinities, they lack the skills to communicate and interact with their peers. And that’s only if they survive the first week.”

Mutiny deflated as he understood. Though he wasn’t sure about the post-birth exigencies experienced by females of other species, Fire Apparition mothers were required to swathe their
newborn in flames, effectively igniting their tiny lives. Should the ignition transference fail, the infant’s tiny life fizzes out and their bodies disintegrate into ash within a matter of minutes. Surely not a problem if the mother were a Fire-inclined hybrid birthing a Neutral. Yet what of the opposite?

“Assuming they succeed, they are mercilessly ridiculed and scrutinized from every angle. Countless harmful questions posed, spoken or speculated, without censor or discretion. *How are you alive? Why can’t you be like us? Why should we pander to you? How are you an Apparition when you possess no power? Why can’t you just die?*”

Aomine’s fingers scratching the parchment drew Kagami’s attention. The hunter’s hand was rolled tight and he wondered. How many times had Aomine asked himself those same questions as everyone from neighbors to coworkers to contract killers discredited his existence as a nuisance?

Kise threw an arm out, toward the door and what lie beyond. “This is her legacy. I do what I do because of her courage. Because we know Neutrals are not disposable.”

He was beginning to think so, too. The overwhelming volume of defectives vibrating throughout the encampment was coercive. As was the sudden display of power. Then Kise upped the ante by not only proclaiming himself a product of Neutral copulation, he substantiated the proof with a government-verified certificate of ancestry. Not a lot of room for debate. Just lingering fragments of indoctrinated disbelief.

Kise seemed to sense the dilemma. He pushed himself from the table and walked to the cot. “Are either of you familiar with an incident during the fifties and sixties involving the persecution of an Ataraxian diagnostician by the Rus-Ainu?”

Kagami turned to face their host.

“I only know the guy was a dissident who violated myriad ethical codes against his medical license.” He recalled the impact the matter had on Hirosawa and the inestimable rumors, fantasies, and conspiracy theories it generated. Akashi’s attention had been misdirected, making it easy for Kagami to establish his life beyond castle walls following his emancipation. Though not for long. “Spent a few rounds in jail and ultimately vanished.”

There was no input from Aomine, only more silence. Which Kise seemed to take as either denial or tacit agreement.

“Do you recall his field of study?”

“Obscure no-name radicals don’t interest me.”

Kise knelt and fished out a box from under the cot. A squatty oak rectangle, about a foot deep and three times as wide, bracketed with green-tinged brass clasps and little decoration.

“This one in particular was a great threat to the heads of the Rus-Ainu because the core of his later work,”—he produced a book and stood, flashing its cover—“was spent proving without a doubt that Apparitions could be robbed of power in the form of Neutrality.”

From the table, Aomine grumbled, “Don’t keep me in the dark, Kagami. You know I can’t—“

Kagami glanced back. Recognition illuminated the hunter’s face, eyes honed over his shoulder. At the book in Kise’s hand.

The Wind Apparition wiggled the book. “From the look on your face,” he said to Aomine, “you’ve
Aomine replied without an interpretation. “That same book exists in the temple repository.” He turned away from the pedigree. “There’s nothing revolutionary about it.”

Kagami passed the message along to Kise.

“And I’m sure by now you realize why.”

The hunter’s gaze slowly drooped as Kagami explained then darted back up, tentative understanding crimping his brow in uneasy wrinkles. Was this how far Imayoshi’s deception reached?

Kise stepped close and pushed the volume into Aomine’s chest. “Putting a book down doesn’t change the ending.” Though clearly dazed, the hunter grasped it. “And neither does cutting out the pages.”

A series of whistles warbled outside. Alternating in pitch like birdsong. Their host headed for the exit. Murky morning light spilled inside as he held the flimsy door open.

“IT’s mealtime,” he said.

He wondered what the signal chain was meant to convey. Aomine tossed him a curious look as if he possessed some insight but he was equally clueless. Scampering feet rushed with the accompaniment of buoyant chatter as a group of children swarmed the entryway. They clamored around Kise in a whirlwind of discordant language. Unease crept up his spine and side-eying Aomine revealed the hunter was also bothered by the intrusion.

Kise dispensed a few short words then filtered into the fleeing mob. Three children split off and barged inside. Two grabbed Aomine and he managed to tuck the book under his arm as he was led away. The last hung back a moment, until they cleared the tent.

Then clasped Kagami’s hand and tugged him to follow.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve used more Apparition Universe-specific terminology this chapter (my apologies) but it was easier for me to write this way and give myself an uninterrupted flow with fewer adjectives or other long expletives...

Since this is an early reveal for Kise, I’ve decided to stick to the sort of aloof, standoffish attitude Fujimaki supplied in the manga.

If you are in any way confused or have questions about something in the chapter, I will be more than happy to explain. :)

[EDIT] Along with the glossary, I’ve also whipped up a quick map to display the place names mentioned in the story to give you all an idea of where the action’s happening!

(if for any reason the url gives you trouble, please PM me so I can resolve it http://i.imgur.com/NN7jlyJ.png)
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Imayoshi gave the painting a final glance. Taking down the Lightning was only the first step in a lengthy journey of correction. But one that needed to be undertaken. By any means necessary.

Chapter Notes

I feel so blessed to have received such a positive response to the last chapter. It really did a lot to bolster my confidence! Thank you all!! I jumped onto editing this chapter as quickly as I could and did all the tweaking I could stand for four days. I hope I've done better to explain in-universe terminology this time around, as this chapter delves into a bit of backstory, but if not, let me know and I'll add it to the glossary (look for it at the end notes c: )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CASIMIR PALACE

Imayoshi and Susa entered the palace lobby between a procession of stately columns that bowed like a smile and fronted the magnificent grand staircase. Now on the inside the evidence of a hasty but organized retreat was clear, leaving no indication that anyone remained. Seventy-two feet square of polished marble spanned around them. Four simplistic Moorish arches broke the walls, facing each other like mirror images. The rearmost accesses let deeper into the building, as Imayoshi recalled from an earlier diplomatic venture, to an enormous courtyard. Nearer to them the yawns doubled in width to accommodate parties political and academic, foreign and domestic. To the right sat the drawing room and opposite to that unfurled the War Gallery.

Which they entered.

Paintings dominated the walls, nestled between white oak panels and cornices, the somber hall reminiscent of a limestone cave networked with tunnels and chambers. Sizes varied between three to eleven feet tall, the larger works dedicated to showcasing the nation’s military victories and the leaders responsible for securing the achievements.

Imayoshi identified a few scenes. The Caucus Standoff of 1055 BCE depicting a tense confrontation between the then-Kaizer and the Czar who advocated, and later assisted, the admittance of the Mother’s Merger into Central Asia. The Xia Conflict of 550 BCE marking the thousand-plus-year war between Fire and Lightning when the former interjected themselves in the Wind’s defense and drew the latter’s retaliation. Kol’tso’s War, when the titular Kaizer rampaged south and swiped possession of Shadow territory ringing the Caspian Sea in 1070 CE. The Annexation of the Shadow in 1301 CE, a punitive end to 300 years of attempted genocide, portraying the surrender of the then-Czar to the aggressive Kaizer. And beside it, like a picture
book telling a story, was the Subscription of the Shadow featuring a more sedate image of conscription where the Czar acquiesced to the ordinance that had since shackled them to the rising Apparition world heavyweights.

Imayoshi stopped to study the portrayal. Susa halted, too.

The backdrop was a rude gradient of smudged oranges, browns, and grays that served to portend the shame and subdued rage of surrender. As well as to draw the eye to the figures in the foreground. A desk drew the line between the defeated and the champions. One man stooped over an unrolled parchment, pen in hand, looking as though he was bowing to the two men positioned opposite. The victors both donned superior officer’s dress respective of their nations. Imayoshi recognized them instantly. The taller man, shoulders squared and spine straightened to transmit dominance, was Kaizer Harasawa Katsunori. Beside him, half a head shorter, Lord Kasamatsu Yukio stood aplomb with the perpetual scowl he was known for. The farthest thing from allies yet unified in the conclusion to enslave the dregs of a civilization that epitomized self-reliance, revolutionized weapon technology, and remained almost exclusively non-militant. Not that it mattered when, in 900 BCE, the Shadow fed Wind immigrants from Arabia to occupy a veritable chunk of Central Asian steppes and deserts secured by the Xia Union.

What did matter was the relocation landed the Wind at the Lightning’s doorstep. The Lightning pronounced the Shadow, who had long asserted themselves as independent pacifists, engaging in combat with other Apparition only when absolutely necessary—a doctrine upheld since their emergence—as flippant backstabbers. Imayoshi had always thought it petty how the Lightning could so blindly confuse compassion for malice. Especially considering that the very same Czar refused to lend support when the Wind’s newly-established Central Asian territory was persistently beleaguered for three hundred years by their wrathful neighbor. If anything it only served to substantiate the Lightning’s conviction towards the Shadow’s alleged duplicity.

Imayoshi admired their stringent adherence to national preservation. Their own protection came first and they never dove into a conflict without having analyzed solutions from every angle. Unlike the Rus-Ainu who continuously cannonball into the fray with zero regard for collateral damage so long as their ends are satisfied. The Ice could even stand to isolate itself more, which Imayoshi always considered the most prolific course. To achieve that stance, the Wolf Pack Pact had to be rescinded. Which would not occur so long as the Rus-Ainu remained unified.

He inhaled a deep breath and let the daunting imagery of hegemonic supremacy soak through him. The laudatory memories surrounding him were a powerful reminder of his immense task and, rather than ruffling him, it brought a sense of calm.

Susa’s hand clamped his shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. He looked back. Resolution fixed his acolyte’s face. Susa bobbed his head then turned and started walking.

Imayoshi gave the painting a final glance. Taking down the Lightning was only the first step in a lengthy journey of correction. But one that needed to be undertaken. By any means necessary.

He trailed after Susa.

The War Gallery intersected with another longer gallery, aptly titled the General’s Hall. Depictions commemorating the empire’s military and political elite flourished along one wall. Embellishing the opposite side was a series of portraiture memorializing the kingdom’s Kaizers dating back two-thousand years complete with engraved placards identifying names and dates of birth and death. The series was interrupted only by a portal letting into the palace’s immense library.

They coursed the stretch, following the rise and fall of dictators.
Twenty feet from the threshold of the adjoining room, Imayoshi halted again. Susa did the same.

He stared at the second-to-last canvas. Into the youthful face of Aomine Daichi. With a dusky complexion and angular features sharpened by narrow cunning eyes, the resemblance between father and son was striking. The result of which, Imayoshi knew, was an affair with a hybrid woman boasting prominent Asiatic genes and a distant attachment to her Ice ancestry. A gross appropriation of attractive characteristics through generations of interspecies breeding going back to the Xia Union. The Lightning called it *diversification of the gene pool* but Imayoshi called it genetic pillaging. For centuries, during and after the Union’s dissolution, tens of thousands of Fire and Ice captures were subjected to Lightning masters, the experience of being repeatedly raped and mined for their coveted physical qualities degraded their conditions so severely that when they did not succumb to disease or abuse, they were discarded as malnourished husks. The practice had been so extensive in its infancy that presently more than 60 percent of Lightning Apparitions exhibited some Asiatic likeness.

The Aomines were the most renowned experts and arguably responsible for spearheading the trade. When his sister had mentioned her involvement with the young heir apparent, Imayoshi had taken a look into the family history. State records documented the Aomine family registry having achieved certification in 1740 CE with Daisuke as the patriarch. Further digging yielded that the actual origin of the family line was 1664 with the birth of Aomine Kozue. Among the last generation of Ice Apparitions produced in the nation’s once-ago homeland, Kozue hailed from the countryside. Possessed of average education, she worked the family’s self-established courier business in the 1700s when the Fire and Ice wrestled for domination of Hirosawa. She and her family became interspersed among the widespread fighting. Border patrollers eventually netted her and others. She was presented before Aomine’s great-grandfather—Kaizer Marko Kuznetsoy—and while she never consented to marriage in blatant refusal to neither take his name nor share hers, she was unable to escape the demand to bear children. Stress and self-mutilation had sacrificed the first dozen fetuses until finally, in 1740, the Aomine name entered the family registry with Daisuke. Kozue nursed the boy through his first six years of life under oppressive surveillance. Then she took her own life.

Imayoshi dreaded Nori’s fate should she pursue intimacy with Daichi and believed her too hapless and naive to realize the danger. Because he was both an Aomine and a Lightning Apparition. But she’d stubbornly thwarted his warnings and interventions, going as far as to become romantically involved. She arrogantly disregarded intercultural laws when their illegal marriage spurned a political disaster that did not staunch her rebellion, merely silencing it. Years of surreptitious entanglement following the blowout led to the discovery of an unforeseen pregnancy. He’d thought the mishap the perfect tool to manipulate her into realizing her foolishness and steer her towards aborting her entire association with the dreaded Kaizer. Instead, she abandoned her principles, her home, and her family.

His throat tightened as emotions long subdued threatened to surface. Frost slicked his clenched fists.

Susa’s voice pulled him back, “Imayoshi.”

He spun around. The shadow’s breath plumed in a light fog and the exposed skin of his neck prickled in alert to cold. Unable to feel the chill, Imayoshi hadn’t noticed the air pitch as his mind wandered down forgotten paths. He took a moment to stabilize himself. The thin layer of frost casting his body dissolved.

“You’re right. I mustn’t lose myself.” He nodded and started for the next room. “Let’s go.”
They entered the west vestibule. Two entryways into the butting face of the solar theater rose to the left, blocked with solid wood doors, intended, he assumed, to buffet noise and light. Another archway plowed deeper into the rear of the structure. Imayoshi’s gaze strafed across the bowing façade of the theater, its Greco-Roman design a stark contrast to the Islamic and Moorish influences throughout. Sandwiched between fluted columns were six sandstone panels arranged in two gapped rows of three that he’d only caught snippets of on previous ventures. The engravings didn’t seem to capture sequence or significance. He saw an archer clutching a fistful of arrows and a swooping eagle. A warrior stamping down a fallen enemy equipped with only a shield. Brief glimpses of scenery, brooding clouds, tattered trees, and speeding lines representing what he thought to be howling winds. Clumps of broken inscriptions tattooed open spaces in a language Imayoshi could not understand though he recognized the characters as Roman.

Susa’s fingers batted his arm.

He jerked a look down. “What—”

The assassin said nothing, head angled toward an arch to their right. Looking into the courtyard. Imayoshi tracked his acolyte’s gaze and spotted something. His chest squeezed as he considered the possibilities. Was it something to be concerned about? Or was his anxiety muddling his senses?

Susa stalked forward, body tight, steps small, focus locked with predatory intensity. Imayoshi quieted his nerves and followed. They crossed the peristyle to a set of stairs dropping into the depressed enclosure. A colonnaded walkway bridged the arcades and bisected the courtyard into two quads. Protruding from the face of the upper quad was a large fountain near where Imayoshi had glimpsed the anomaly. They cleared the steps and entered the upper quad through a break in the waist-high wall.

The pressure in Imayoshi’s chest intensified and his stomach knotted.

Seated on the rim in a thoughtful hunch was Akashi Seijuurou.

The Lord’s fingers were steepled between his knees, taut neck holding his head level yet his gaze bore into the flagstones. He wore a cap-sleeved Mandarin shirt and breeches scrunched into the folded neck of combat boots. Stylish embossed leather overlaying protective sheets of carbon fiber fronted the chest and scaled the haunches, thighs, and calves. Imayoshi recognized the ensemble as that worn by the Fire’s vanguard soldiers and military police. Leaving the arms bare exposed a dangerous and versatile vector to launch flaming projectiles and facilitate offensive and defensive capabilities. The lack of armor spoke more of lethality and less of sparse armament or consideration for safety.

Akashi’s mouth hooked into a smirk. Without looking up, he said, “You’re a real piece of work, Imayoshi.”

The Lord’s voice barely tickled his ears, his thoughts muffled by an all-consuming white noise. Nebuya’s men had been dispatched little under twenty-four hours ago. When the chief reported to him in the Water Room yesterday he’d been assured the palace and its staff would be subdued by this time today. Yet not a single soldier or civilian was in sight. Nor corpses nor bloodstains, structural damage, discarded weapons, or an inkling that anyone had ever existed save for a few pieces of toppled furniture, strewn papers, and nearly invisible footprints. Could that have all been theater? A ruse orchestrated to draw them inside? Judging by his adversary’s battle-ready uniform and unexpected appearance within an otherwise thriving government building eight hours into a conflict he found the reality difficult to accept.

But an even larger concern loomed.
Akashi stood from the fountain and dusted his pants. Imayoshi couldn’t resist flinching and resented that his accomplice remained composed. Hands perched atop his belt, Akashi craned his head toward the pewter sky. A twinge of insult screwed Imayoshi’s face at the blatant gesture of indifference. Two of them and one of him and his attention was anywhere else.

“Nice of you to bring Susa along,” Akashi said. “I think it’s time we renegotiated his employment.”

Imayoshi didn’t appreciate the disrespect. His fists tightened, skin pebbled with icy stones.

“That you’re here means…” He hesitated, not wanting to voice his suspicions.

“Don’t be so surprised.” Akashi’s chin dropped. “I’ve always been two steps ahead of you.”

A thin breath left his lips as his shoulders unhinged. Two steps ahead. But how? He’d been careful to conceal his movements. Mindfully choosing when, where, and how to speak and confiding in no one but Susa. He darted a look into the shadow’s tight-lined profile, eyes magnetized to their adversary.

“There’s no way you knew we’d be here today,” Susa said.

Akashi’s arms fell as he faced them. His mouth slanted in a knowing smile that Imayoshi did not like.

“If you had performed your scheduled security rounds yesterday you would know that I would, in fact, be here. Instead, you were skittering about.” Menace darkened the Lord’s face. “Weren’t you, Mukade-kun?”

Susa lurched forward and Imayoshi clumsily snagged the man’s arm, drawing him back. That was the first instance he had ever heard Akashi openly insult anyone. And with a derogatory slur, no less. Centipedes are reviled in Shadow Apparition culture because the arthropod’s undulating locomotion, spiny legs, and venomous bite became attributed to the species’ shadow finger technique, an essential physiological expression as unique and a part of their biology as ice was to Imayoshi.

The attack, though aborted, did not disarm Akashi. Which only further confounded and angered him. He still couldn’t wrap his head around what transpired before their arrival. How an entire contingent simply vanished and not a speck of evidence existed.

So he decided to voice it. “What’ve you done to my combat chief? Where are his men?”

Akashi’s brow hiked in what he knew was feigned surprise. “How bold of you to admit treachery in front of me.”

“I’m in no mood for games. If you’ve known my intentions as you say and prepared for this then I refused to allow you opportunity to gloat. Now answer my questions.”

Akashi barred an arm across his chest, covering his mouth as if in thought. Imayoshi’s spine tingled with uncertainty. Something about the Lord’s body language wasn’t right and he still couldn’t get an accurate read on him. Physical expressions utilized by the Fire and Ice are similarly interpreted due to their 3,000 year-long stint as the Xia Union, where they shared many things, including language. Verbal and nonverbal. The divorce may have encouraged the fledgling nations into immediate sociocultural overhauls, but the words and actions of their shared history could not simply be erased. Some—but not all—gestures remained unchanged and still carried usage even now. Making it second nature to decode each other’s unspoken language. While Ice Apparitions displayed from their backs, Fire Apparitions manifested their buried feelings and intentions within
the trunk. Leaving the chest open, as Akashi had done before, signaled calm, confidence, or security. Yet now he was closing himself off. Was this more misdirection?

Akashi’s hand flew away in dismissal. “Your chief never showed.”

He was not expecting to hear that. Yesterday evening, following Aomine’s retaliation in the Water Room, he’d tasked Nebuya to guard him. Persistent struggling had compelled the chief to incapacitate his rowdy nephew, securing their leave. He assumed that once Aomine’s containment was definite Nebuya would retract to the original objective, rejoining his men and spearheading the incursion upon Casimir.

If Akashi was speaking the truth and Nebuya never showed…

The white noise in Imayoshi’s brain resurged in a piercing roar.

Did Nebuya betray him? Or did Aomine somehow manage to escape? Was Nebuya dead?

“His men, on the other hand, are parading for the penitentiary in the west.”

Susa muttered to him, “We’ve been had.”

Imayoshi jerked his gaze from the flagstones and, with a swallow, forced his mouth to work.

“How?”

Akashi did not move, arms in a half-cross but for a slight tip of the head. As if propelling him on.

“There’s not a single indication that anyone was here,” Imayoshi said. “No damage, no bodies, no blood. Even if you came with reinforcements—”

“What makes you think I required help?”

The insult went undisguised, only adding to the punch of admission.

Susa’s gruff voice interjected. “You expect us to believe that even the great Akashi Seijuurou could best a battalion all by his lonesome?”

Akashi smiled at the mockery. “Care to explain how I couldn’t?”

Imayoshi’s body tensed as he was assaulted by an immense but unseen threat. Nothing about this was right. The Lord’s unanticipated appearance. Intercepting the battalion. Contradictory body language. And now an uncharacteristically haughty outspoken challenge.

Before Susa could respond, he clamped the assassin’s shoulder to emphasize silence.

He knew the right answer. “You’re defective is why.”

A fact seldom spoken but universally known. Once Imayoshi had been sworn in as Dan he’d extensively researched his rivals within the Rus-Ainu. Upon returning from the second campaign of Hirosawa, he’d commissioned Susa to retrieve a detailed copy of the fledgling Lord’s personal file. Records of Akashi’s early life were spotty, declaring an extravagant performance in Academy, as well as university, and outlining basic identification. What stood out were a collection of reports submitted between spring and fall of 1915.

Surrounding an incident during the biannual Assessments. The event was a mandatory rite of passage that all juveniles—Apparition youths whose ages fell between 40 and 57 years old—
underwent to achieve recognition as actualized Apparitions before reaching adulthood. Mock battles of endurance pitted the six Apparition breeds against each other and victory was decided by rendering the opponent unconscious or forcing surrender. In days past, killing the challenger worked just as well but was becoming a less acceptable method. Especially in the host country at the time, where it had long been outlawed.

Armadura, the Earth Apparition Republic, spring 1915. Akashi and other juveniles from all walks Apparition life convened and were matched via lottery, as dictated by tradition. His first contest paired him with a native Earth youth and it became a spectacular affair. For two reasons. It lasted no more than fifteen seconds. And Akashi didn’t lift a finger in retaliation. Witness accounts told that the round opened with the opponent charging for and tackling Akashi to the ground. There was a brief struggle. Then the challenger went limp and Akashi, pinned beneath, called for the mediators to terminate the match. The juvenile had died and the forfeiture tallied a loss for Akashi. Investigators conducted hundreds of interviews and a later-performed autopsy demanded by the Armaduran government revealed nothing that could explain how a healthy juvenile dropped dead from a mild scuffle. When his time for questioning came Akashi submitted that he’d been pushing at his adversary’s chest to free himself, corroborated by mediators and nearby spectators. He had not landed a single strike. Nor, interesting enough, had he released his flames.

Fall of that same year, the Lord’s private physician diagnosed him with degenerative peripheral neuropathy, a rare disease that would gradually impair the body’s ability to properly regulate involuntary actions. Including nature manipulation.

And for the next 91 years that condition persisted.

Meaning apart from physical strength there was no way in hell Akashi could overpower an entire battalion alone.

Akashi hummed, tucking his arms behind his back.

Imayoshi took the cue to spell it out. “Your illness prevents you from exercising your power. With control of your peripheral nervous system compromised you’re denied access to your flames.”

“Do you always believe what you pilfer from confidential personal records?”

He suffered the jab with a tight jaw.

Susa chimed in, “There some reason we shouldn’t?”

“I believe Aomine Daiki was able to pull it off.”

Cragged ice crusted along Imayoshi’s stiffened spine.

“Though,” Akashi continued in a tone meant to alleviate the insult, “I’m sure it’s elementary to achieve when your victim is a wailing infant.”

His skin flushed in an aggressive, chilly tingle. How did Akashi learn of that? He and Susa had been meticulous to keep the affair isolated and secured. No tracks, no tails, no paper trail. Nothing that connected them. No one should have witnessed what transpired in that house.

“Who told you?”

“Susa,” Imayoshi barked, grabbing and jerking the assassin’s arm.

Susa yanked free and threw a glare back. “No sense skirting. You let the leak drip rather than
plugging it.”

“You can’t just play into his bait, you fool. You’ve just implicated everything we’ve worked for.”

“I’d say you did that all on your own,” Akashi said.

Susa whirled, an array of shadows zipping the stones and coiling up the Lord’s legs. Trapping his arms against his ribs locked their nemesis firmly in place.

Despite the dampened threat, Imayoshi couldn’t bring himself to breathe easy yet.

Akashi’s face remained a mask of indifference. “That’s rude. And here I was about to share one of my secrets.”

Susa snarled. “Cut the shit.”

The bindings tightened, indicative of the way the Lord’s face crinkled in discomfort. Ice crept up Imayoshi’s shoulders, trickling down his arms to mesh with the frost webbing his hands. Blunt ridges topped his knuckles. Not optimal armor in this climate but he sensed something awry and a weak shield was better than none at all.

He thought he spotted a defiant twinkle in the Lord’s eyes as his head tipped skyward. Akashi dragged a slow deep breath, the effort stressing the fetters. Then huffed and the shadows shuddered violently in a chaos of crackling static. An electric hair raced along the stones and stung Susa.

The assassin’s body recoiled as if shoved by an invisible force. The restraints dissolved in a flurry of charcoal powder.

Susa panted, hands pattering up and down his arms and legs. The bewildered look he tossed Imayoshi said it all. Did you see that?

He could only stare back. Because yes, he had.

And he could not believe it.

“Now that I’ve shown you that little trick.”

They started at the Lord’s voice—measured yet dripping with venom.

Akashi was rolling his head, kneading fingers into his neck. Scraggly bluish-white coils rocketed up his arms, branching down his chest then feeding to the floor with each squeeze.

His arm dropped.

Fiery heterochromatic eyes stared with predatory intensity.

“I’ll show you just how wrong you are.”

Apparition Map of relevant territories mentioned in this story.

Chapter End Notes
Glossary of Apparition World Terms:

NEUTRAL: the offspring of a hybrid and purebred that possesses a normal Apparition's lifespan and biology but has no nature affinity (i.e., Fire, Lightning, Ice, etc.)

[BLANK]-INCLINED: a term used to indicate the nature of a hybrid, because they carry two natures instead of one (i.e., Aomine is a Lightning-Ice hybrid but he is only able to use Lightning, therefore he is a Lightning-inclined hybrid Apparition)

ATARAXIA(N): the name of the Wind Apparition country and a demonym of Apparitions who hail from there (i.e., Kise is a Wind Apparition, therefore he is an Ataraxian)

ARMADURA(N): the name of the Earth Apparition country and a demonym of Apparitions who hail from there

GORYOKAKU: capital of the Ice state of Shi Tudi; Aomine, Momoi, and Imayoshi live here

HIROSAWA: capital of the Fire state of Bokoku; Akashi and Kagami live here

CASIMIR: capital of the Lightning state of Pervobytnyy Les; Hyuuga and Aomine's father hail from here

FRINGE APPARITIONS: Apparitions of one state/country that regularly and illegally trespass the boundaries of neighboring states/countries

RUS-AINU EMPIRE (or RUS-AINU): the partnership of the Fire and Lightning originally forged in 1000 CE

XIA UNION (or XIA): the past partnership of the Fire and Ice, starting in 2000 BCE and ending in 1000 CE

MOTHER'S MERGER: the partnership of the Wind and Earth, starting in 3000 BCE and ending in 1945 CE

WOLF PACK PACT: a punitive arrangement between the Fire, Lightning, and Ice enacted in 1990 CE that forbids the three powers from launching attacks on one another; it also deconstructed the Ice's military and defined present-day boundary lines
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Kagami gestured to the book. “What’d the Oracle say?”

“That we’re the biggest club of assholes there is.” He dropped his arm and looked at Kagami. “We were wrong. Every single one of us.”

Chapter Notes

Finally an update! I had been playing around with the edit on this and future chapters before Irma steamed her way through and disrupted everything from my work to my domestic responsibilities. :| But now that she’s gone and cleanup has been done, I’ve finally found time to sit down and continue working on this bad boy! Hooray! Again, I have attached a copy of a glossary as well as the hyperlink to the Apparition World map as it applies to this story. I have also included a guide to better give you guys an idea of how old the characters actually are versus how old they look. ( i should have done this eons ago, I know...)

As always, I will be happy to answer any questions :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEUTRAL CAMP

Aomine retraced the passages he’d read—one week ago—in Goryokaku’s repository. He and Kagami sat on a felled tree trunk in the swooping bend of the camp’s picnic area. More logs, organized in two columns, provided more seating with an aisle cleaving a path to the service tables. A bowl of stewed beans, sausage, and what he assumed were mountain vegetables of some kind sat beside him, half-eaten along with a wedge of untouched bread. His last meal had been yesterday morning, after the emotional exchange with Satsuki about his burn, and had not since returned. From stress, he knew, when food was the last thing on his mind.

Kagami held onto his empty dishware, why Aomine wasn’t sure, and passively observed the crowd of diners, loiterers, and workers. While helpings of steaming food, a variety of nuts, fruits, and berries, and bread had passed hands, they had hung back with their tiny minders and surveyed the community Kise had amassed. By Aomine’s estimation, around fifty members, including Kise, comprised the caravan. Individuals ranged from infant to middle-aged. No elderly he’d noticed, which was not hard to figure out. Mortality of Neutrals far exceeded the normal average with more than 65 percent unable to reach sexual maturity and adulthood.

Another thing he had noticed was the presence of Apparition breeds apart from their host’s stock. Four by his count. Two Earth, one Fire, the last Shadow. He’d spotted them filtering through the picnic area accompanied by various familiars, busying themselves with chores. If Kagami had seen
them, he’d so far kept it to himself.

He appreciated that Kagami had left him to his thoughts. He still couldn’t wrap his head around all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. For one-third of his life he was a proclaimed defective Ice Apparition, supported by few and denounced by most to be a fraudulent Neutral protected by a pious and compassionate relative. Now, as simple as an epiphany, he was a realized Lightning Apparition. Heir to the Lightning’s empirical seat and a tool which his uncle had labored and conspired to capitalize as a bargaining chip against political adversaries. After murdering his parents and staging the assassination of the Kaizer to refocus him as the perpetrator.

All that complication just to crush the Lightning monarchy?

How could an infant possibly play into such a convoluted and lengthy scheme?

He knew there had to be a larger picture Imayoshi was envisioning. There always was. He just could not see it.

Familiar words tattooed the page opened in front of him. Ones he had read in another book of the exact same title in the temple, explaining the elusive study of genetic inheritance and a shot in the dark of Neutral creation.

Displayed above is the lineage of a documented family. The grandfather, pictured as yellow, and the grandmother, pictured as red, were pureblood and produced a hybrid son of Fire and Lightning. Reports detailed that despite his half-blood nature, the son’s genetic prowess was affiliated with that of the Fire. Genealogists confirmed that the Lightning genetics remained dormant, to be passed on to future offspring. Mating with an Ice woman complicated the genetic process of heredity. As aforementioned, Fire and Lightning are dominant genes, which the son possesses. Ice is recessive in comparison. Genealogists theorize that during fertilization and embryonic growth, dominant genes contend for succession. This, scientists agree, is what is responsible for the creation of Neutrals.

His fingers balked to turn the page and he was thrust back to the library. What if he continued on and there were no answers to satisfy him? If there truly was no basis for Neutral copulation, no evidence to support their vitality, it would only justify the advocacy of violence, injustice, and widespread animosity condoned by the governments of the Apparition world against Neutrankind. Ones he and Kagami, among many others, had partaken in.

He lifted the chunk of bread and chomped down a thick bite as he revealed the next page.

From a cursory sweep he identified text unseen in the temple’s doctored edition. Bread still clamped in his teeth, he hunched into the book and read.

It was with remarkable serendipity that I met the Hiwatari-Akari family. Their desire to be properly documented and understood marked the perfect opportunity to thoroughly examine the definitions of Neutrality that fostered their unique family. Four adults—two pairs of bonded individuals—and three children made up the unit. The matriarch, Kaila, was a pureblood of Hi-Sokoku-descending Fire Apparitions while the patriarch, Luka, hailed as an unmixed Pervobytnyy Les-descending Lightning Apparition. Gou, their hybrid offspring, shared their physical traits—
from his father: superior height, dense body features, and an angular face; and from his mother: a blunt nose, gentle red eyes, and warm-toned skin, the features a clear suggestion to her Asiatic ancestry—with an inclination to Fire. As I interviewed the son’s spouse, an Ice woman by the name of Kota, she confessed that her mother had actually been a Neutral woman. Which I confirmed when, during a survey of her lineage beforehand—she mentioned her mother’s “pearly black eyes,” a trait exclusive to Neutrals.

Gou’s spouse was a descendant of the Shi Tudi, decidedly the ancestral line of Ice Apparitions, and a child of a Neutral woman, yet she possessed peculiar heterochromia that yielded one eye blue, the other green. She further divulged to me that her maternal grandfather was the carrier of the green eyes she later inherited through a genetic mutation coupled with the common blue archetype of ocular pigmentation among Ice Apparitions. By and far, I had surmised my theory was on the right path. But I required further analysis as I was unable to interview the deceased. With gentle persuasion the family allowed me access to examine and question Gou and Kota’s three children. All of whom, the dear lady reported to me, were actually triplets.

Alone, the turnout of triplets is not so farfetched among hybrids, with statistics of multiple births occurring in moderate numbers. Again the good lady Kota astounded me as she expounded the trials of her labor. All three children had been born sequentially. My doubts quickly dissipated as I observed the children. Two boys, who looked like mirror images of each other, and one girl, who sat apart with gripping black eyes. How, I wondered, could these children be considered triplets if not only their biological sex was not proportionate but the mother’s heterochromia only reached the boys?

Luka, the patriarch, informed me of yet another surprising fact. One boy possessed an affinity of Fire while the other wielded Ice. But the girl. She was a Neutral.

As I looked amongst the members of the Hiwatari-Akari clan, I wondered how only Fire and Ice presented when Gou expressed two dominant traits—fire and lightning. After speaking with the children for hours, conducting a brief physical, and manifestation experiments and demonstrations, I took several weeks to condense my findings and have thus considered the following scenario to have occurred in-utero:
Aomine squinted at the hand-penned chart below, finally savoring the bite of bread that had turned spongy between his teeth.

Aomine absorbed the image, ignoring the foreign script, and thought back to the previous pages explaining the separation of dominant and submissive natures. Even if a pureblood inferior Apparition mated with a hybrid, so long as they boasted dominant traits, weaker genes could always be overwritten or shelved for future generations. Yet this account threw a wrench into the cogs of conventional Apparition eugenics. Like two superpowers warring for supremacy, Fire and Lightning clashed, and only one could be victorious. The loser was benched.

The battle laid out in his lap seemed to play out a little differently. Rather than being filtered out and allowing dominant and recessive genes to transfer normally, the secondary dominant nature persisted in the creation of three gametes. One to inherit the superior nature, another to accept the inferior nature, and a blank slate who was denied the leftover secondary dominant nature. On paper it sounded like a curse. A realization hit him as his eyes trailed the lines.

Neutrals were created and devalued by the very Apparitions who most rallied for their destruction. How ironic.

Words from an earlier passage rang out. *A paradox of discrepancies for centuries.*

He couldn’t agree more.

Aomine tore another bite and continued reading.

*It seems clear to me that Neutrals are a vital keystone in the reproductive success of Apparitions across the species. The circumstances of their inheritances are far from pitiable.*

*No.*

*They’re fortuitous. Like stem cells, they are able to resurrect that which is decaying: the*
convolution of incompatible genes.

Neutrals are a precious reservoir of hereditary potential. A blank slate to strengthen future generations so that we may all continue to cohabitate, intermingle, and expand our borders.

The limit of their potential is, in fact, limitless.

Those final words echoed in his mind. He recalled similar platitudes from Imayoshi growing up. At the time they meant everything to him. Now they served as a reminder of just how far his uncle’s deceit reached.

He studied the illustration of the Hiwatari-Akari family pedigree and he considered what the revelation meant for his own children. How his and Satsuki’s genes would have shaped their existences. Before, when he’d foolishly believed that Neutrals only beget more Neutrals, he’d lamented the torment his children would endure in a world where their kind—his kind—would be ruthlessly persecuted. Imayoshi’s brazen admission to erasing all specks of evidence correlating to his crimes had served to confirm something for him. His three departed children were not Neutrals at all. If they had been, snuffing out their lives prematurely would have achieved nothing. Three perfectly healthy newborns don’t suffer a sudden, rapid decline of health out of the blue. The math wasn’t impossible to figure out. As he’d learned in the Water Room. The combination of his hybridism and Satsuki’s affinity meant that regardless of whether the child represented as Lightning- or Ice-inclined, they would represent.

Which would untangle Imayoshi’s conspiracy down to its roots. Exactly why his uncle abducted him was still unclear. But the fact remained that once he fell into the Dan’s custody, all traces of his inherent abilities absolutely could not be exposed.

To achieve that end, three innocent tiny lives were sacrificed. Their mother irreparably bereaved. And their father haunted with guilt that his incompetent genetics were to blame.

He stared at the black circle at the bottom center of the tree, caressing the mark with his thumb. What of the Neutral girl, he wondered.

He spotted a line break followed by a caption.

The above source, contributed from the surviving journals of renowned interspecies diagnostician Alphonse Ybarra, were publically authenticated and published in 1966. Government backlash from the Rus-Ainu has eradicated all but the aforementioned account. The doctor, as it would so happen, has similarly been removed from public awareness.

What a shame. Clearly this doctor was onto something monumental. Of course the largest profiteers of Neutral genocide would want to silence the dissenter and disavow his findings as heresy. For a moment he explored his memory, back to the mid-sixties when he and Satsuki had finally overcome the grief of losing their second child. Neutral animosities were flaring then, hunts becoming vigorous and competitive. Of which, Aomine was a popular victim.

In the four years lapsing the heretic doctor’s disappearance and the turn of the seventies, he had been targeted by assassins Haizaki Shougo and Moriyama Yoshitaka and his third child stilled after a meek three days of life. And the threats only skyrocketed thereafter.
He heaved a sigh, his head still sloshing with a persistent ache, and pinched the book’s spine. A hand dove into the closing pages. Aomine fumbled it open again. Glossy black eyes gleamed up at him beneath a thatch of wiry curls. One of the children who’d escorted him before.

He’d been so absorbed in the text he hadn’t noticed. Anxiety clutched his chest as Curly wiggled onto the log beside him. His bowl was set further away.

Curly jabbed a finger at the words, bouncing an inquisitive look between them and Aomine.

His jaw slackened but no words came.

“What are you reading?”

Some of the panic subsided as he intercepted the dialect. One spoken by Apparitions of a dependency sandwiched between Bokoku—the homeland that the Fire and Ice have spent several millennia squabbling over—and Zhestokiy that distended throughout Nise some 300 years ago. Did this child come from such a family? No outward markers would indicate so, leaving language as a more reliable giveaway.

A thought occurred. When he and Kagami were guided here, their chaperones stuck around long enough to provide them a meal then scurried off. Leading Aomine to believe they would not be approached again. The other refugees hadn’t exactly ignored them, reacting little to their presence apart from furtive glances, mumbled words, and acknowledging gestures. For being such a marginalized group, they doled out such unanticipated hospitality.

But why was this kid here?

Aomine reared back as Curly leaned over his lap, flailing their wrist as if trying to draw attention. He looked over. Kagami was being swarmed by the other minders from earlier, clamoring around him like subordinate wolves greeting their alpha. Words left Curly quicker this time in a language Aomine did not recognize. Then Curly slid back, sitting tighter against him and their stark eyes bore into him. Strange how such darkness could beam so bright, he thought.

A finger poked the page again.

He shot Kagami a helpless look. The prince threw his hands up in apology and one of the busybodies crowding him leapt into his open lap. What help.

He dragged a breath before regarding Curly.

“I’m not gonna read this to you. It’s too complicated,” he said, sticking to the same dialect the child used before.

*It’s not even a children’s book,* he thought.

“Not all of us like kid books,” Curly said.

“Look, not to sound ruder—”

“You’re capable?” Kagami scoffed.

Aomine turned a scowl on him. A grin crinkled the man’s eyes in a mask of amusement as he aided another child onto his shoulders with the ease of flinging a sack.

Prick.
He decided to ignore the heckler and focused on Curly again. “Do you always ask strangers to read you stories? You don’t know who I am.” He paused. “I could be a bad guy.”

Again Kagami chimed in, this time with a derisive snort, and Aomine pinched his arm.

Curly replied, unfazed, “Kise wouldn’t bring bad guys here.”

Valid point.

“What about you?”

Curly’s head cocked, gaze raking him a moment, then shrugged. As if that explained anything.

“You look like other Ice Apparitions we saw on our way here through the mountains. Dark skin, hair, and blue eyes. I heard you speaking their language with your friend and Kise, too.”

He overlooked the allusion of a friendship between him and Kagami as the innocent examination was starting to bother him, kicking the panic that had taken a backseat into anxious overdrive. The kid wasn’t wrong, though. Like his mother, he hailed from the land of Ice, bestowed with similar distinguishing characteristics. He was reared as one of them, tutored by their educators, employed by their government, and versed in their customs, etiquettes, and mannerisms.

But he wasn’t an Ice Apparition. Or even a Neutral.

Aomine looked away from Curly’s probing stare and his throat tightened.

“Looks don’t explain everything,” he said.

“So, you’re not an Ice Apparition?”

A cold spike pierced his chest. It wasn’t an accusation, he knew. For much of his life it had been the only identity he’d been comfortable acknowledging. Even if he’d have to wedge defective into every defense. With all that had happened in the last week he hadn’t an opportunity to reflect and ask himself.

What was he?

As Aomine started to speak, Kagami cut in, “He’s a Lightning Apparition.”

He whipped his head. Kagami’s straight face stared back, the furrow of his brow that usually bolded agitation instead translated certainty. As if he was reaffirming Aomine’s fragile indecision.

The little monkeys erupted into an emphatic chatter. The child straddling the prince’s shoulders lurched sideways, toward him. Aomine recoiled as lanky, sun-speckled arms looped around his head and neck. His hands shot out to stabilize which the kid took as an invitation and swooped down onto him. The book thudded to the floor, pages seaming neatly closed as the youngsters flooded him.

Curly jostled his leg. Thing One clung to his arm and his head remained clutched in a tight embrace by Thing Two as he climbed onto his back.

“I didn’t know Lightning Apparitions could be this dark,” Curly exclaimed.

Thing Two piped in, “Are you mixed?”
“You’re super tall, too,” said Thing One.

The monkey on his back craned close enough that Aomine noticed scars interspersed like lights in the night sky blanketing a freckled face. “Your eyes are blue like Ice Apparitions, though.”

“Shadows have blue eyes sometimes, too,” Curly said.

“And darker skin.”

“But they don’t get this tall, right?” Thing Two said, palming Aomine’s skull.

Curly shook his arm. “Tell us. What are you?”

Aomine hesitated, meeting each of their attentive gazes, faces alight with intrigue. He was feeling smothered. His mouth refused to work.

Then he felt a tug at his neck. The arms encasing his head slid away. He peered back. Kagami was planting Thing Two into a space on the log between them. The prince mumbled a few words that seemed to take. Instead of sitting obediently, the little monkey draped across Kagami’s back, attention locked on Aomine.

Knowing he wouldn’t be able to dodge the interrogation, Aomine took a moment to collect himself. So long as Kagami was present he must choose his words carefully. He remembered the dossier found in the prince’s home and wasn’t about to divulge any unmentioned details. Especially considering their alliance was both temporary and fickle.

He rose a warning finger for the youngsters to see.

“One at a time.”

—

Aomine still sat on the hewn log. Breakfast wrapped up around ten minutes ago. In remarkable uniformity, the diners dispersed from the area and threaded into the tents. Serving staffed had tidied the tables, toting barrels, bins, and buckets of leftover food away. Bustling could now be heard among the dark canvas peaks.

His head was bowed, fingers netted over the back of his skull as he tried to revive the energy drained from the children’s fervent inquiries. Social exhaustion, as he’d now learned, was more taxing than any sort of physical test he’d endured.

Footsteps neared and a familiar presence settled beside him on the log. He did not look up but unlocked his fingers to scratch at his scalp. The volume lay balanced across his thighs, scooped from the dirt.

“That bad?” Kagami asked. He had left to usher the kids back to their awaiting guardians. Their dishware had disappeared along with him.

“I forgot how much kids talk,” he said, hands running down his face.

“Kids don’t sweat the small stuff the way adults do. Differences are cool, not threatening.”
Aomine peeked a skeptical eye through his fingers. Kagami smirked then gestured to the book. “What’d the Oracle say?”

More than he expected, truth be told. He’d read the very same account in Goryokaku’s repository. But with the missing page intact suddenly the book’s message adopted a whole new view. Erasing stigma that spanned millennia by simply taking the time to talk to someone. Aomine, or even Kagami, could have managed that given the sheer volume of targets they’d slain over the decades. And yet they hadn’t.

Because of public stereotype.

That Neutrals were defective. That they were nothing like Apparitions. That they were worth more dead than alive.

And he and Kagami had fallen into the trap like so many other able-bodied hunters.

How many lives had he claimed? How many had Kagami?

Earlier when Kise herded them through the encampment he’d felt the immense pressure of scrutiny squeezing him. A nauseating whirlwind of guilt, unease, and vulnerability. He wondered if Kagami felt it, too. Whether it was obvious they were hunters or not didn’t matter. What’s more, these people didn’t seem to care. Something that became evident when those children so haplessly entered the personal space of two complete strangers. Then when Aomine’s nature was revealed. They had surprised him with astonishment rather than repugnance, showing that popular conceptions of character were not definitive. Lightning Apparitions trademarked aggression, cruelty, and elitism with such arrogance that they commanded a potent threat in the Apparition world to even their allies.

Despite knowing that, those children disregarded caution because they realized Aomine intended no harm.

He lifted the book, flipping from cover to cover, then exposed the spine.

“That we’re the biggest club of assholes there is.” He dropped his arm and looked at Kagami. “We were wrong. Every single one of us.”

“We couldn’t have known that.”

“Ignorance doesn’t excuse wrongdoing.”

Kagami said nothing and his gaze did not submit to the rebuke.

“All this doctor did,” —he jiggled the book— “was talk to someone. And Neutrals alone aren’t the only ones affected by the sterility myth. Their families are equally ostracized for protecting them.”

He told Kagami about the doctor’s exposition.

“Imagine that,” he said. “A family of fully realized Apparitions sacrificing their freedom for the sake of a single Neutral child’s chance at life. A sheltered existence of maximized protection. Consumed by paranoia. Dragging fallen branches to mask your every step. Checking twice over your shoulder. Second guessing everyone you see as a possible enemy lying in wait.”

Kagami’s eyes fell, as if considering.

Aomine shook his head. “All these people have ever done was try to live in a world chock full of
ignorant bastards who didn’t want to accept that their life had value.”

“Like you.”

He thought he heard a spat of insult and snapped a glare that quickly thawed at the sincerity holding Kagami’s eyes. He was finding it difficult to process commiseration from an unconfirmed ally. One that had twice come within a hair’s breadth of killing him for the same misguided preconception just one week ago. He tipped his head to the sky. The soupy pewter clouds scooted along, thickening as they headed over the distant peaks, suggesting that rain may finally fall.

He was grateful to know the truth. At the expense of innumerable lives too late to matter. Nothing he nor Kagami nor any other serial offender could do or say would be adequate recompense.

And with Hyuuga’s murder still fresh in everyone’s minds he possessed little favor with the Rus-Ainu, anyway. Though he’d had next to none before the incident at the fort.

Kagami stretched, groaning with exertion as he asked, “So, what’s next?”

He lowered his gaze to sweep the picnic grounds. He tucked the book to his belly and opened his palm. A mild thrum nipped below the surface. He remembered what it felt like back in the bathhouse when those first jagged lines shot free and the angry tingling they left behind. It brought with it a weight he had never known before. Scrunching his fingers amplified the sensation.

Relaxing the muscles discharged whitish-purple threads.

He’d acted on emotion in the Water Room when he targeted Imayoshi and was disappointed that his aim was so easily thwarted. And surprised at himself that he assaulted his uncle. Apart from episodes of hormone-driven defiance in his youth he had never so boldly accosted Imayoshi. In that moment his thoughts were consumed with provocative images of that monster’s cold hands taking the lives of his parents and swiping him away. The same hands that had woven the convoluted web of lies that governed his entire existence. That had terminated his children. Poisoned Momoi’s maternal confidence. Then extensively blackmailed and later killed Tetsu.

Static rioted in his upright palm. Tightening his fist quashed the protest.

He knew exactly what his next move was.

But he had to ask himself.

Could he really do it?

Apparition Map of relevant territories mentioned in this story.

Chapter End Notes

Apparition Aging (also known as the "Triplicate Scale") is a formula to determine an Apparition's physical appearance in contrast to their biological age. Represented as a formula, it would be:

Biological Age/3 = Physical Appearance Age (because Apparitions age about 3 times slower than humans!)
ex: Aomine (born 1906, now 100 years old) 100 (bio age)/3 = 33.3, would look, physically, like a 33 year old human male! Tada! Now any time a character's age is mentioned, simply divide by three and you'll have an idea of how old they appear :) 

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Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Akashi leaned close and said into his ear, “Didn’t think I could handle two-on-one odds? Don’t flatter yourself, Imayoshi. I was and always will be leagues ahead of you.”

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the tardiness but I finally alloted some time to post an update! Hooray!! Work offered some incentive-ized overtime over the last few weeks and being a single income, I could not resist and MAN am I exhausted. BUT I have not forgotten about all of you who have still stuck by me with this story. I'm working on it every cance I get and now that I'm not bound to sacrifice my nights and early mornings, more chapters will be coming.

Granted this one is a shorty but I don't want to jump the gun and post two in a day without having a chance to do some deep-rooted proof reading. But stay tuned because there may be another update THIS WEEK. :)

Thank you thank you THANK you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Imayoshi huffed strained breaths. Akashi opened the melee in front of the fountain of the upper quad. Three shots was all it took to send them scurrying for cover. The first pushed Susa back. The second drove Imayoshi back toward the colonnaded walk they’d emerged from. The last shot sent Susa leaping the waist-high barricade of the walk. As Akashi charged a fourth round, Imayoshi saw his out and sprung into the break. It’d been too long since he moved this agilely and he’d felt something fold uncomfortably as he tumbled. He pressed his spine to the cloudy wall of ice he’d erected to close the gap and caught his breath.

Susa ducked low twenty feet away at the base of the stairs.

He cursed himself for not delving further into the Lord’s records. But he doubted he would find anything incriminating. Porous record keeping was commonplace one hundred years ago when integrity came by word-of-mouth or as a signed certificate of acknowledgement. His own circum vitae was lacking body up until the last fifty or so years with the Ice among the last to conform to proper archiving practices. Still, he could not just accept that lazy justification.

Never displayed a trace of power, his ass.

Since the start of the clash Akashi had only unloaded three rounds.

He and Susa had the advantage of quantity but realized caution must still be heeded. Two against one could easily be evened out to a fair fight with one well-timed attack. And he was not prepared to take that bullet. Nor face Akashi alone.
His gaze found the assassin still hunkered at the foot of the narrow steps. Susa’s hand was searching the small of his back, attention trained on the threat beyond the barricade. Imayoshi noted the teasing gleam of metal pinched between the man’s fingertips. Steeling himself, Susa risked a peek over the edge.

The fourth bolt punched the base of the pillar and Susa shrunk back to the stairs, debris dusting his eyes. Like all the other projectiles, this one hadn’t been remotely lethal. Arrow-thin and always just off the mark by a hair’s width. Almost as if—

Realization slammed into him.

They were off target because Akashi was herding them.

And a cramped stone enclosure, partially secured by a wall of ice, was the perfect kill zone.

Susa yelled, “Imayoshi.”

Boot soles pounded the ground to his left. He swerved his head.

Akashi had hopped the wall and was towering over him.

Imayoshi scrambled to get his feet under him.

Akashi whirled and drilled a kick into his chest. The milky fortification fractured as he was sent tumbling head-over-foot into the upper quad. His skull clapped hard as he unrolled onto his back a few feet from the trickling fountain. Agony seized his muscles and he strained to force them to draw breath. Bowing his back only maximized his torment and he flopped onto his belly, hoping downward force would reduce the pressure crushing his diaphragm. That bastard Akashi made certain to angle his strike just right.

Crunching ice alerted him to the Lord’s advance. He groped his throbbing chest, attempting to work himself from the floor. He managed nothing more than rickety wheezes, elbow dropping to the coarse flagstones in submission as the Lord sauntered closer. Icy granules still clung to his skin, struggling to solidify into a proper shield.

He craned a look through scuffed lenses. No measure of anger traced the calm lines of Akashi’s face. If anything he looked entirely composed.

Imayoshi wedged a knee under him, ratcheting his trunk up. Movement behind Akashi, in the arcade near the cloister stairs, attracted his eye. Peeking over the top of the half-wall, dagger still between pinched fingers, was Susa. A quick glance at the Lord told him what the assassin intended.

Imayoshi’s attention snapped back to Akashi, who was three steps away.

He stole a sharp breath then slapped the ground. Pikes hurtled across the stones and clamped Akashi’s foot in a vice. The Lord balked, arms flying out for balance as the frost expanded to lock his ankle. Imayoshi clambered to get away as Susa bent around the pillar, arm cocked.

Lack of air sapped his legs of strength as he veered to Akashi’s right but he urged them to move.

Then sounds. Like crisp snow being crushed underfoot. From behind.

A firm hand hooked his arm and yanked him back. The courtyard reeled by in a nauseating blur as he was roughly spun, his own arms crossed around his belly like an ill-conceived straight jacket.
Panic exploded through him and he thrashed.

Pain lanced his right forearm and he wailed. Retaliation stalled.

He strained a glance down.

Susa’s dagger protruded, its tip embedded deep.

He did not understand. How could Akashi have detected their deceit so quickly and maneuvered him so accurately before Susa could react?

His associate’s face drooped with similar astonishment.

Akashi leaned close and said into his ear, “Didn’t think I could handle two-on-one odds? Don’t flatter yourself, Imayoshi. I was and always will be leagues ahead of you.”

He rocked back at the slight, hopeful to pop the self-righteous prick’s face but knew Akashi wouldn’t be stupid enough to give him the chance.

Unease squirmed up his spine, ridging the ice. If he acted swiftly, Akashi wouldn’t even realize his mistake.

Susa shook away the daze and darted from cover, toward the break in the half-wall Akashi had propelled Imayoshi from moments ago.

Crooked sharpened spines speared through his shirt.

One of Akashi’s hands dropped away. The other, still tightly locked on his injured arm, ripped hard and unwound Imayoshi in another disorienting spin. Again the Lord’s foot pummeled, this time into his stomach. Breath heaved from Imayoshi’s agape mouth as he crashed to the flagstones. The spines cracked and ground into the stiff muscles of his back as he writhed to snatch air.

With bleary eyes he searched for the colonnaded walk. Susa stood frozen in the gap of the half-wall, its stones still crusted with ice, seeming to stand his ground. Akashi faced the shadow, appearing to have disregarded Imayoshi entirely.

Like a whip, Akashi cracked off a fifth bolt that pierced the base of the column closest to Susa.

The assassin drew back. Then turned and charged into the lower quad through an opposing partition.

Akashi took off after him.

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**Apparition Map** of relevant territories mentioned in this story.

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Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Kagami decided the time for ignorance was over. “What are you going to do?”

“What I have to.” Aomine brushed past and the door clapped shut behind him.

Chapter Notes

Another update in so short a time? Glorious, isn’t it! I made the promise to post another chapter within the week because I’ve been in such a good mood the last few days and the unwavering support of you all has inspired me to get back to the grindstone and I hope I have delivered!

I understand if my writing style is a little curt and I seem to be enamored with cliffhangers but even so I want to showcase the story as it play sin my head. (Kinda like an action movie sometimes, lol) In any case, I have been working on outlining the final, wrap up chapters and I still have about 8 more to be edited before publishing so do not FRET!

As always thank you so much, I am so gratified for your support and enjoyment of this story!

(I FINALLY WATCHED LAST GAME, AAAH! The feels had me goin’, people!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

NEUTRAL CAMP

Kagami followed Aomine as they retraced the route to Kise’s tent. It wasn’t a sure bet he’d be there but Aomine seemed to be working off the assumption that their whimsical host would make himself easy to find. Camp occupants streamed through the figure-eight loop like blood cells coursing an artery, undertaking chores and preparing for the day, all while paying them no attention. Few Neutrals lingered in conversation and those who acknowledged them as they passed received reciprocation from Aomine in the form of a terse nod.

Which convinced him that the hunter was no longer distracted and anchored down by self-doubt. When Kagami asked about his intentions earlier he noticed the indecision that had been radiating from Aomine since their escape from Goryokaku had been rewritten with steadfast resolve. At first Kagami thought it his imagination. But the brief glint of absolution that loosened the lines stressing Aomine’s tired face gave him no comfort. First the refusal to answer the question then the slight discharge of static, provided Kagami his own answer as to what the man planned to do.

His gaze fell to the book dangling at Aomine’s side and he wondered. Were the missing words really so revealing as to generate such a sudden change? He could not say for sure. Aomine hadn’t offered to allow him to read and he hadn’t asked.
They marched on and spotted Kise conversing outside his tent with one of the guardian Apparitions he’d noticed leaving the picnic area during breakfast. Extra muscle to protect the caravan, he knew. With as many as fifty individuals of varying ages and health concerns, Kise couldn’t hope to defend them alone.

As they neared he noted the way Aomine rolled his shoulders back, standing taller to project himself more immune to the Wind Apparition’s presence than he really was. How much of the posturing was intentional, Kagami couldn’t say. The rate of adaption to his newly-actualized physiology was impressive, he had to admit.

The sentinel noticed their approach, muttered a few more words, then bowed in retreat.

Kise faced them, one leather-gloved hand on his hip.

Sticking to English, Kagami said, “Don’t you look chipper.”

“It’s too early to start the day off on the wrong foot.” Kise’s mouth bowed in what he was beginning to believe was a permanent smirk.

“Have you ever?”

Kise’s head lolled in reflection, eyes wandering far away for a split second, yet his smile remained. “In a different time, in a different place.” He pointed to the book, saying to Aomine, “Did you find what you were looking for?”

Kagami provided an interpretation.

“Hard not to ace the test when you’re given the answers,” Aomine said.

Kise’s smile deepened.

Kagami said nothing. This man knew how to dance around a conversation.

“And you?” Kise asked Kagami.

“Quite a story.”

“You don’t believe?”

“I believe in what I can see.”

Finally, Kise’s expression faltered.

Kagami gave him no chance to respond. “What I see is you breaking a multitude of international laws. Trafficking, trespassing, squatting, harboring illegals. I definitely wouldn’t discount hunting violations, some destruction of property, possibly numerous counts of assault and battery. Maybe a few homicides. And I’m sure there are other unmentionables as well.”

Insult pressed a deep wrinkle in Kise’s brow. Aomine stood silent, not understanding a word but surely registering the atmosphere.

“I also see,” Kagami continued, “that these people are victims of oppressive, xenophobic governments guided by misinformed world leaders who made an uneducated, hasty decision that has forced someone like you and your mother to revolt against that decision that has allowed assholes like me to make a living off of systematic murder.” He paused. “I see you saving these people regardless of the lengths you have to go to achieve it.”
Rather than relief, skepticism narrowed Kise’s eyes.

Not the reaction he expected. “What?”

“I just wasn’t prepared for a put-up. You realize I’m putting you out of a job?”

“I’m in no position to complain.”

Kise seemed to accept the admission, if the pleased crease of his mouth was any indication.

Aomine’s attention had deviated from the conversation, scanning the activity within the camp. The Neutrals appeared to be carrying on a more determined pace than when they’d first arrived. “Looks like everyone’s packing up.”

Kagami swept a look around to realize the same. “You got somewhere to be?”

“Wherever I’m needed. The fewer prints I leave behind, the better.”

“The life of a vagabond.”

Kise raked gloved fingers through thready fringe and flashed a grin.

Aomine seemed to sense the meeting was winding down and lifted the book to Kise. He waved away the offering with a polite hand.

“Hold onto it for me.”

Aomine hesitated, casting Kagami a confused stare. Clarification was made and the book dropped back to the hunter’s side. “You say that like you’re gonna spring back up on me.”

In what he hoped was his final service, Kagami conveyed to Kise, whose face betrayed nothing as he said to Aomine, “You never know.”

Deciding it best not to persist further, Kagami tipped his head in concession. Kise clapped him gently on the arm then, with the same hand, balled in a fist, bumped his knuckles to Aomine’s chest. Kise then turned away and strutted up the trail without urgency. The gestures were not lost on Kagami. Both translated as simultaneous greetings and farewells among peers in Fire and Lightning cultures. He wondered how Kise, a man of the Wind far detached from the Rus-Ainu, became so acquainted with them.

Silently they watched their host retreat, triggering Kagami with a problem. What was his next move? Aomine’s was clear.

Twenty feet away, as Kise neared the bend, he spun and jabbed a finger to the tent.

“Your gear is inside and your elk is still up on the ridge,” he called over the din. “He wouldn’t cooperate.”

Of course he wouldn’t. Kagami raised an arm in affirmation. Aomine offered a meek parting wave. Kise turned and disappeared into a throng of juveniles carting linen-filled baskets.

He decided the time for ignorance was over. “What are you going to do?”

Aomine dropped his head back, studying the sky again. Wispy overcast sheets folded into a thick rippling blanket as the clouds continued their journey westward. Clarity seemed to strike him as his tense muscles unhinged.
Turning for the tent, he paused to lock eyes with Kagami. “What I have to.”

He brushed past and the door clapped shut behind him.

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Kagami and Aomine climbed the switchback path winding up the sloping face of the ridge overlooking the valley. The trek from the camp had taken around ten minutes. Neither of them had spoken. He’d allowed the hunter privacy to change, more for himself than for modesty. Facing the reality of what his impulsive arrogance had done to the man’s body was the last thing Kagami wanted on his conscious now. Then there was his own scar. The figure scouring his back radiated a constant noticeable discomfort and would raise immediate questions if it were to be seen. Ones he had no mind to answer.

Kuroko’s words from the warehouse invaded his thoughts. *You both bear the other’s mark.*

That didn’t mean they had to resort to the childish compromise of *I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.*

So, he’d idled outside until he was sure Aomine was halfway decent before entering to reclothe himself. To his relief, Aomine had been too distracted to nitpick.

He hadn’t thought to bother Kise for pain killers or anti-inflammatory aids to ease his misery and as his skin stretched with exertion, he wished he had.

Aomine led the way as they ascended and he couldn’t help pondering how the hunter was faring with his injury. Upon returning to Goryokaku Kagami assumed treatment would have been priority one. But when he had been conscripted to assist Kise in cleaning the then-unconscious Aomine’s wound he’d seen a stark contrast of neglect and abuse in the mottled blotches of healing and damaged scar tissue. Broken wrinkles clawed through glossy skin bristling angry and oozing discharge like slow-flowing lava. The cause looked to be blunt trauma and tearing. The confrontation in the Water Room? Had to be. He experienced his own share of thermal burns, albeit superficially. Clumsy hands and molten steel were a poor combination. But flames could never mar him. Fire Apparitions possessed immunity to self harm, reabsorbing the energy which manifested as little more than a minor heat increase.

Despite the severity and hindrance the injury posed, Aomine labored the hike without complaint. The book was tucked into the small of his back. Kagami had been mindful not to offer to hold it, feeling Aomine would not trust it in the hands of an up-in-the-air ally. He wasn’t interested in gouging the facts. The synopsis the hunter provided him was enough for Kagami to admit he had been wrong. No sense prying deeper. Desensitizing himself to the issue would only promote him to further normalize Neutral killing more than he already had.

They crested the ridge. The pathway snaked into a patchy stretch of weeds and shaggy grass that dissolved into the loom of the forest they camped in the night before. Aomine stopped and swept a look across the girthy stalks then to the mountains rimming the valley beyond. Distant sunlight splashed a dreary glow upon the slopes and crags.

Kagami faced the forest and let out a sharp whistle. He hoped his familiar was still in the area as Kise had said.
He set his sights on Aomine. This confrontation needed to happen. Whether they liked it or not their conjoined success hinged on equal parts compromise and patience. He was ready to deal. But to do that he needed Aomine to lower his defenses. The hunter’s attention was now fixed on the ground. Kagami eased closer and squinted. A gnarly-armed star blackened the dirt a few feet from the plateau’s steep drop. Proof of Aomine’s verified identity and decades of pent-up emotional convolution. And he seemed to be drawing confidence from the scorch.

Kagami kept himself out of arm’s reach, remembering last time, but remained close enough that he could not be ignored.

“You dodged my question twice already,” he said. “So, I’m going to ask you again.” He paused, waiting for a reaction. Aomine did not budge. “What are you doing to do?”

Aomine turned, face calm save for appraisal creasing his eyes. “What makes you think I have a plan?”

“Because contrary to what everyone thinks I’m not a metal forging village bumpkin with hot air for a brain. I know more than you think so if you’re thinking of doing something stupid, you need to let me help you.”

Aomine squinted. “How hard did Nebuya smash your head?”

“Not nearly as hard as you did his.”

He hadn’t wanted to recall that reality so soon but he needed Aomine to grasp that alienating himself was only further complicating the ordeal.

Aomine’s mouth tweaked as if he wanted to speak but did not. His head drooped.

Kagami gave him a moment to wrestle with his pride.

“I need you to do me a favor.” No effort was made to mask resignation.

Exactly what Kagami wanted to hear. As he’d learned once in the Water Room, then again in the fort, and just recently at this very spot yesterday, pressuring Aomine was paid back with hostility and aggression. And with a new unbridled power, Kagami was less than adamant about becoming a lightning rod.

He grunted, cueing the hunter to explain. Desperate eyes bored into him.

“I need you to go back to Goryokaku. Find Satsuki and get her the hell out of there. Imayoshi may not be there now but I can’t risk leaving her as another loose end to tie up.”

“What makes you think he would?”

Aomine heaved a frustrated sigh. “Because she’s all I have left. Isolation fosters vulnerability which then breeds dependence. He’s eliminated every other obstacle poised to shatter his model of obedience.” His tone rose, fueled by emotions Kagami knew that had been beaten down to save face. “Why wouldn’t he target her when she’s helped shelter me from him? You said before that she and Tetsu asked you to get me out. Time to return the favor.”

Momoi’s voice on the radio crept back into his mind. A poorly-veiled promise to rack his genitals for a lewd remark made about Aomine. Another of her admonitions followed. *Find him, take him away from this place, and keep him safe.* Which he fully intended to do. But the thought of proximity to her felt distinctly unsafe for him.
Without thinking, he said, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Sparks jolted from Aomine’s neck as he threw his hands down, fists tight, and yelled, “You owe me.”

Kagami’s jaw slackened. “Excuse me?”

“I wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for you. Everything’s come crashing down since you popped up. My uncle turned out to be a scheming, backstabbing murderer. My best friend of thirty-four years is dead.” Sullen eyes flashed hot. “And to top it off, I went from being a defective Ice Apparition slash sheltered Neutral to a Lightning Apparition heir to the largest empire of assholes in the world. All in one week.”

Aomine’s expression darkened with conviction. Electric hairs flared from the nape of his neck like hackles on an aggressed dog.

“You ruined everything.”

Heat burned in his cheeks as he struggled not to latch onto Aomine’s bait. The hunter was still angling for a fight, what he’d lifted from the unaltered book no doubt adding to the guilt and anger clashing within him, making him all the more volatile. Apologizing once hadn’t worked and Kagami wasn’t stupid enough to try a second time.

“You wanna start something?” Aomine growled.

Pale orange-yellow tufts had sprouted from the hotspots, flickering in warning.

“I’m trying to solve it.”

“You face says otherwise.”

He couldn’t stow his exasperation as he barked, “Just stop it.” He scrubbed away the flickers, gliding his hands roughly through his shaggy mussed hair. “For starters, you never let me finish before you bombarded me.”

Aomine did not shrink to the scolding, only scowled.

“I never said I wouldn’t extract your ex-wife. There’s a give and take to this situation, Aomine. And you looking for every opportunity to hurt me isn’t getting us a damn step closer to ending this.”

The hunter’s body tensed and his eyes fell. “You’re not making this easy.”

“Nothing is. So suck it up.”

Aomine didn’t appreciate the snap and Kagami doesn’t allow him a chance to rebut. “Now tell me what you’re planning.”

After a moment of consideration, he vented a hard breath. “I’m going after Imayoshi.”

“I know that much.”

Aomine bristled. “You asshole. Why ask me then?”

“I mean, what do you plan to do when you confront him? He won’t just admit what he’s done just because you asked nicely and intimidating him like you have me the last twenty-four hours sure as
“hell won’t open him up, either.”

“Let me worry about that.”

“Last time I left you to your own devices, you nearly bludgeoned a man to death.”

“What would you rather I have done?”

“Use your damn head,” Kagami yelled.

Aomine flinched.

“Your actions have consequences,” he continued, tone leveling out. “Now more than ever. And you can’t go knuckle-busting your way to getting answers until you’re satisfied.”

Aomine groaned with exaggeration. “Telling you was a mistake. I knew you’d disagree.”

“One of us had to be the rational one.” He paused, gauging. “You’re really not going to tell me?”

“It’s all you’re getting.”

From the edge of the forest, the elk emerged, trotting leisurely. Aomine turned to the scorch and toed the dirt. The elk sidled to Kagami and bunted his arm. He gave the bull’s muzzle a reassuring stroke and conducted a quick once-over. The saddle and harness were still intact and there were no signs of harm, sickness, or tampering. Coward probably hid in the undergrowth.

He didn’t like that Aomine was still sliding around his questions while doing nothing to disguise his intentions. He knew the man wanted to pound a confession out of the Dan. To quiet decades of emotional torment and achieve much needed closure.

Aomine’s hackles calmed, thinning to thread down his arms. The current hiccupped a few times before stabilizing, billowing toward the pewter sky.

“Looks like you’re getting the hang of it.”

Aomine snorted at the observation, lifting a relaxed hand alive with dancing frizz. Kagami noticed the knee-jerk impulses had become more purposeful. Refined by repeated exposures that was forcing Aomine to channel the power into manageable state on the spot. Such exponential growth was impressive, considering that up until a few days ago, Aomine hadn’t the access to nor knowledge of his inherent ability and the complex mechanisms that governed its use.

“It’s disgusting,” Aomine mumbled. “Feels like thousands of annoyed angry bees swarming under my skin.” He peered back at Kagami. “Fire feel anything like that?”

Kagami said nothing. He resisted the pull to acknowledge proof of his own lack of control marking Aomine’s waist.

He motioned to the undulating frizz. “Sure that’s the best way?”

Aomine studied the sky. “Definitely the quickest. I’m no expert and I’m sure as shit not a genius who’ll crack the code after a few tries.” He shrugged. “It if worked once, it’ll work again.”

“You sound awful confident.”

“Call it a pet theory.”
Too optimistic for Kagami’s liking. Apparating was an endemic skill set to the Lightning, enabling an electrically-engulfed Apparition to assimilate with thunderclouds. But it required years of discipline and exposure. Both of which Aomine had in short supply.

Aomine eyed the elk. “Besides, our goals lie in different directions and one vehicle between us won’t accomplish either with the timeframe we’re faced with.”

Fair point.

“Well, if you’re fast-traveling,” Kagami pointed, “then you should hand that over to me.”

Aomine retrieved the book from his back.

“Like you say, you’re new to this. It may not stand up to that kinda energy.”

Aomine stared hard at the cover, hesitant. “Fine. Keep it safe for me.”

Kagami caught the airborne book. A firm grasp on the lead lines steadied the elk from starting.

Aomine faced the cliff, silky electric threads thickening into ribbons.

“Don’t let that scaredy-cat familiar of yours gnaw on it,” he called without looking back.

Kagami secured the tome in one of the saddlebags. Bluish-white light strobed, bleaching his vision. Keeping one hand on the reins, his other flew up to shield his eyes. The elk’s head reared and tossed. It took a second for the tension to drain from the animal’s neck testing Kagami’s hold. A few blinks reoriented his senses and he found the scorch mark.

Aomine was gone. The cinder produced yesterday had engorged, its arms longer and frayed like down feathers.

Overhead the clouds gave a soft grumble.

Kagami mounted the saddle and veered the elk into the trees. A pop to the ribs propelled the animal to trot. Remembering the tack Kise used to lead him into the valley made backtracking to the abandoned campsite easy. As he rode, he swallowed the relaxing alpine air. His brain still throbbed with each hoof beat, as though being squeezed by a cruel invisible hand. For much of the morning it was only a minor nuisance. The beating he underwent in the Water Room still wrung through him. His knee, back, and neck radiated a constant clawing ache. It had been many years since he threw down so violently and never with someone as large as Nebuya Eikichi. The effort to ignore the pain was just as taxing as acknowledging it, so his discomfort was here to stay until this affair was put to rest.

He’d just have to cope. Or, like he’d admonished Aomine, suck it up.

Remnants of the site came into view within a few minutes, much quicker than the sloth-like pace he’d carried before. Unavoidable then, considering he had been lugging an unconscious 180-pound invalid while steering a man at knifepoint. Stones ringed blackened embers that had long gone cold. As he skirted the area he noticed the tripwires remained untouched. He searched beyond the boundary of traps, squinting. Then he saw them.

Faint outlines of approaching tracks. He edged close. Fragments of boot prints and two-toed hooves. Size and tread markings for at least one set matched Kagami’s boots.

He was no scout, the skill of tracking definitely more polished in Aomine’s repertoire than his. But
he could follow a heading just fine. He pointed the elk onto the imperfect trail and encouraged an increase of speed.

By his estimation yesterday the trek from Goryokaku spanned more or less twelve miles. Even at his fastest it would take him roughly half an hour just to reach the temple outskirts. Searching the capital to locate Momoi could take longer. He didn’t want to think about a confrontation with Aomine’s ex. Especially in light of the possibility that Imayoshi may have killed Kuroko.

And how was he to find her? Akashi’s onslaught had been raging since dawn and Imayoshi would not have absconded the temple without preparing mobilization orders. Army or no army, the Ice would fight. As they always have.

Which only further complicated his mission. Where could he hope to find her among the chaos quickly enough that he could still intercept Aomine at Casimir before he assuredly did something stupid?

The elk kept a determined pace, plowing through the underbrush and vaulting obstacles.

He had thirty minutes.

To figure something out.

Chapter End Notes

**Casual Reminder: Kagami is interpreting Aomine's Japanese to English for Kise and the reverse English to Aomine in Japanese.**

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[new] **APPARATE**: the endemic skill of Lightning Apparitions to assimilate with naturally-occurring electrical currents (similar to the Shadow’s teleportation and the Fire’s immersion)

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**RUS-AINU EMPIRE (or RUS-AINU)**: the partnership of the Fire and Lightning, originally forged in 1000 CE
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Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

“You’re not wrong. They wouldn’t heed my claims.” Imayoshi smirked. “But what of your brother, Kagami-kun?”

Akashi squinted.

“He doesn’t know, does he?”

Chapter Notes

I've been eagerly anticipating the posting of this chapter just for the sake of unveiling a bit more of a background for Akashi. But fight scenes, UGH! My kryptonite... :( I hope it's fluid enough.

At the rate I'm going, I hope to be able to update at least 3 times a month. Adulting gets in the way sometimes. (I want a refund!)

As always, the glossary will be posted in the end notes. If I overlooked one, feel free to inform me so that I may add it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Susa scampered from the colonnaded walk into the lower quad, Akashi in pursuit. Imayoshi labored to breathe. The second blow to his chest maximized the aftertaste of the first. Air dissipated before he could drag a lungful. Anger and desperation only worsened his misery.

He hadn’t expected the Lord capable of exerting physical force with such precision and technique. Considering that his health was supposedly compromised, denying him opportunity to fine-tune his talents.

Yet every move Akashi made advertised unprecedented tactical expertise.

Wobbly arms cranked his chest from the stones and his hand searched for the fountain. He found the lip and hung himself over the edge. A few weak breaths fueled his body to work itself upright, bringing him to kneel.

Sounds of a struggle grabbed his ears and he twisted a look back.

The two men were dueling in the lower quad. His vision had nearly cleared. Enough that he was able to discern ally from enemy. Shade blanketed the enclosure, sunlight denied by the thickening overcast that seemed to portend Imayoshi’s misfortune.

A thought dawned on him and he couldn’t help the flutter of hope.

Susa had retreated into his element. And Akashi foolishly plunged in after him.

The battle was close-quartered, as though the men had taken to punching it out. He could not be
sure, as from his vantage point most of what he could see was his nemesis’ back and Susa facing his attacker.

Akashi’s upper body swayed, like before, as if to maintain balance. Susa’s shadows must have been recast, their grip on the Lord’s legs stronger. The assassin thrust a strike. Within the fist Imayoshi noted a glint of a weapon. Akashi weaved around the blow and snagged Susa’s arm, wrenching the wrist.

Susa shrieked.

Metal tinkled against stone.

Lightning raced across their connected arms in a wink. Then Akashi pounded Susa’s gut with a supercharged fist. Imayoshi heard the wind leave the shadow in a heaving gasp as his body hinged forward.

The Lord tugged him forward and, with an elbow to the back of the neck, pummeled Susa face-first into the flagstones. The body dropped out of sight and a cold hand clenched Imayoshi’s chest as he held his breath.

Akashi was readying for another assault, hand taut and swarming with static. He launched a palm thrust downward. Where Susa lay immobilized. But no impact sounded. No crackling discharge. No cry of injury.

Akashi’s body stilled.

Imayoshi waited.

What was he doing? Was Susa defeated? And if so, would Akashi switch gears and come for him again?

Sparks bubbled from the stones. In the upper quad, just outside of the colonnaded walk. Ten feet from him. Tentative clusters blossomed into a frenzied, frothing maelstrom. The shadows trembled within the haze. A blackened form erupted, tumbling toward the fountain.

Susa’s body unfolded in a pain stricken arch. Fragile electric ribbons faded like shooting stars as he desperately sucked air, neuronal pathways surely overloaded. Many times Imayoshi had witnessed Shadow Apparitions unearthed from submergence this way. And many came out far worse for the wear than Susa. Professionals were no more immune to electrocution than novices once mated to the darkness but the end result was always the same.

Imayoshi cringed as he observed his acolyte’s pain. It had been a crapshoot. One that Akashi had infuriatingly anticipated and appropriately responded to.

Damn this son of a bitch.

Susa clawed for breath, body rigid. His own athleticism may have diminished once he achieved high office but this man was a seasoned warrior. Son of a respected diplomat. International university graduate. Served within the Lightning military while undergoing apprenticeship with the Assassin Agency. Unanimously elected to insure the protection of the three most powerful sovereigns in the Apparition world. Possessed of superior education, exemplary diplomatic skills, and the hard-earned proficiency of erasing any problem.

Susa Yoshinori was an irreplaceable asset.
Reduced to writhing and gaping like a beached fish by a medically-declared invalid.

His associate seemed to grab hold of himself, working onto an elbow, then his hands and knees. His head lifted. Sweat and grime streaked the frustrated face and Imayoshi spotted powerlessness betraying the glare locked on him. A feeling he had been struggling to conceal.

An ache still permeated his chest. His arm burned from the dagger’s bite and his fingers had not stopped trembling. Susa’s eyes dropped, honed to the weapon lying at Imayoshi’s feet. It must have dislodged when Akashi put him down with that last kick.

Imayoshi’s brows sloped, creasing his eyes in a warning he hoped transmitted. Not a good idea.

“That may be the first smart thing you’ve done so far, Imayoshi.”

Their attention snapped to the echo of the Lord’s taunt. Standing atop the tiles of the colonnaded walk was Akashi, hands upon his hips in a display of triumph that triggered instant annoyance within Imayoshi. Lightning spurted across the Lord’s body as if fighting to claw its way out.

“And I assure you, your next reckless endeavor will be your last.”

He did not appreciate nor cow to the threat. He’d had time to think while the arrogant prick tangled with Susa about a hunch he’d been cooking up. Sure, Akashi intended to intercept them here, as was now evident by the man’s readiness when they arrived. And his attacks hadn’t been completely half-cocked, delivered with a reasonable dose of seriousness that generated the necessary level of panic that inevitably landed him and Susa in this dire situation. Teetering on the edge of defeat with their resistance—and stamina—burning out.

He knew Akashi enjoyed toying with his quarry, both on the battlefield and at the conference table. But this was something different.

And since they hadn’t been killed yet, he decided to try, “Why wait? You’ve had plenty of chances.”

“Underhanded tactics are below me,” Akashi said in his trademark monotone.

Imayoshi snarled, ice crinkling in his tightened fists. “How is this not underhanded?”

Susa plopped onto his backside, his breath finally evening out. Fatigue dragged his face. Imayoshi noticed the assassin’s dominant hand was shielded from their nemesis’ view behind his thigh. He wasn’t certain how many of the shortened knives Susa retained but hoped his associate wise. The dagger from earlier lie close. Enough that he thought it possible—

“It’s not underhanded when your enemy is predictable. All that has transpired is a consequence of your own narrow-mindedness.”

Imayoshi snorted a laugh. “Haven’t you done the same?”

Scrutiny scrunched the Lord’s brow.

“Exposing your lie to us was a mistake.”

“You intend to blackmail me?” Akashi asked. “And who among the Rus-Ainu would believe you?”

True. He doubted his credibility would do more than ruffle the empire’s allies into debating
hypothetical possibilities. Pros and cons of the Lightning gaining a significant authoritative foothold against the Shadow and Fire once Akashi’s suppressed nature is revealed. Postulating if the Lord would deviate from his longstanding principles and policies and inject foreign influences. Though surely Akashi knew this revelation could ruin him. Since the empire’s emergence in 1000 CE, those who donned the crowns of Fire and Lightning were friends only on paper, understanding their government’s cooperation was a tool of mutual political, geographical, and economical advantage. Jousting for the most superior and convincing course to sway the weaker opponent to yield and steer the empire in their favor without dominating and inviting the global-scale conflict that would trigger if one of the two juggernauts dared infringed on the covenant that bound them. Imayoshi had dedicated his entire spell as Dan to fracturing the accursed pact. Worse was one elitist superpower dominating the fate of their world. Worse still were two who wrestled over the privilege like infants over a prized toy.

He would be damned if he let Akashi believe him defeated.

He caught Susa with a quick side-eye. His accomplice still sat back, arm out of sight, attention focused on Akashi.

“You’re not wrong. They wouldn’t heed my claims.” He smirked and adjusted his glasses. “But what of your brother, Kagami-kun?”

Akashi squinted, an action that went undisguised as static prickled around his tense form.

Susa pushed himself to kneel.

“He doesn’t know, does he?” Imayoshi asked, withholding a grin. “Hybrid heirs were a widespread and accepted practice between ruling families during the Dark Ages. It stood to reinforce the partnership in a joint effort to pulverize the undesirables. We both know that today such a cooperation is viewed quite differently.” He paused, savoring the pleasure of seeing his adversary irked. “Masking the truth behind a flimsy, imaginary illness only agitates the waters of suspicion surrounding your father’s duplicity concerning your birth.”

Akashi did not budge and he did not relent.

“What did you really do to that Earth juvenile? They never did conclude the exact cause of death. But I know what happened.”

Akashi said nothing.

Imayoshi swallowed an energizing breath and used the fountain to push himself upright, facing the tyrant.

“Point blank and hair thin. Right to the heart.”

The Lord’s mouth quirked, levity washing away the scowl.

“Quite an imagination you have but your originality is lacking. The details sound all too familiar, as though I’ve heard them before.” Akashi paused as if searching for a memory. “Yes, I remember now. That’s how you killed your sister before you abducted her son.” He pointed to a spot just right of his sternum. “Right here. And to maximize her agony you perforated her lungs.”

A cold sweat blanketed Imayoshi making him feel hotter in his own skin than he imagined possible as the Lord pinned him with an accusatory glare.

“Is that what you wanted? For her to watch as you plotted to steal and corrupt her child?” Akashi’s
arms fell to his sides and in a voice coated with disdain, said, “You’re pathetic, Imayoshi.”

Sweat hardened into icy scales.

Enough of this shit.

He kicked the dagger into Susa’s awaiting left hand. As the assassin intercepted the incoming weapon, the anticipated hidden second knife came into view. Two quick whips launched the missiles for Akashi.

Surprise appeared to overtake their nemesis and his arms flew up for protection.

One of the projectiles found the right forearm. The other speared the left thigh, a good six inches above the knee. Even the almighty Akashi Seijuurou cried at the impact.

Pride swelled within him. Susa had properly understood his earlier insistence not to reach for the fallen dagger. Crafting the perfect opportunity to strike would be their salvation in this fight and he was pleased that his associate had relied on their many years together to halt his otherwise impulsive hand.

Success likewise illuminated Susa’s face as the shadow stood.

Akashi slowly lowered his arms, chest hitching with the shock of attack. Tremors racked his weakened leg, failing to steady him, and he skidded down the tiles to the edge of a fifteen foot drop. The Lord managed to catch himself, half-dangling, then swung to drop to the flagstones. His body crumpled, no effort made to brace for the fall, and he clutched his injured leg with a pained gasp.

The Lord’s back inflated with a deep breath.

Then, without strain, he stood, shoulders pulled back. Only a twitch in the eyes betrayed any discomfort.

A smirk curled Akashi’s mouth. “Thank you for proving my point. Predictable and narrow-minded.”

He looked at Susa, electric wires streaming between the dagger handles. “If you don’t mind, I’ll hold onto these.”

Forked lightning lashed from the prongs, stinging the stones at Imayoshi and Susa’s feet.

They jumped apart.

Icy spines gloved Imayoshi’s fists. Plating on his chest, arms, and spine hardened.

What a complete disaster.

He couldn’t afford to cross-check with Susa first. They were running out of time, options, and endurance. Besides he was confident his accomplice would act as necessary. As he always had.

So he steeled himself and charged.

Chapter End Notes
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Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

“My dad said he heard that someone saw a woman carrying a man from the hallway.”

“Why would she be carrying someone away from the Dan’s office?”

“Don’t know. The witness said they say the woman lumbering out that way with a man on her back.”

“You mean senior nurse Momoi Satsuki?”

Chapter Notes

Somehow I feel like this update is long overdue :( But rejoice! I will be posting two chapters (this one included) tonight. For two reasons, the first being that the original content spans too many pages for a single post and I feel breaking it up helps to alleviate some confusion that may happen. And two, because I feel like you all deserve it. I move at a snail's pace to get these chapters chugged out that I feel bad posting such small chapters. Anyway! I hope you enjoy these updates.
Thanks, as always!

GORYOUKAKU

Kagami again climbed the wooden risers that he’d descended yesterday evening when he extracted Aomine. The muddled din of anxiety and trepidation boomed from the temple decks, punctuated by the bark of officers’ commands. He’d dutifully re-traced his steps and found the loom of the hunter’s guild. After dismounting and tucking his elk into the firs and spruces that hugged the building, he’d surveyed for activity. When none was detected, he’d jogged the footpath to the stairway.

He entered the fourth temple plaza and absorbed the scene. Apparitions flooded the decks, streaming in either direction without colliding or clotting. Less than he had observed yesterday when the heralds were hawking the imminent invasion. Which meant that Imayoshi’s forces were mobilizing. Individuals donning gear much like his borrowed uniform dotted the complex. Some marched in packs, carrying crates and canvas sacks. Other stood atop railings and benches, shouting advisories and pointing directions. Huddled in the plaza around him were clutches of young and old. More uniforms chaperoned them and Kagami noticed a few of the minders sweeping through with clipboards.

With hunters overseeing evacuation and emergency drafting, he wondered about the absence of Nebuya’s combat squad.
He knew he could count the chief a no-show, at least. Which eased his worries.

He sincerely hoped the man was alive.

As he took in the majesty of the temples once again, he realized something. The same tally happening nearby seemed to underway at the other four plazas. And he couldn’t assume the hunters weren’t patrolling the interiors to roundup any lingering noncombatants. If he moved elusively perhaps they wouldn’t notice him deviating from the obvious evacuation protocol.

His gaze raked the towering facades, stopping on the four-tiered third temple to his left. Scaffoldings mounted its rear corner where extensive damage to the first and second floor roofs was being mended. Though reparations looked to be suspended today.

A thought struck him. He hadn’t bothered to ask Aomine where to locate Momoi before they parted.

He dropped his forehead into tense fingers and kneaded. The knot from headbutting Nebuya yesterday was still there, and tender.

Where was he supposed to start? It wasn’t like he could just tap the first bystander he saw and ask her whereabouts without drawing attention to his undisguised eyes.

He needed to think. Aomine was no master of apparating but Kagami didn’t doubt for a second that the man’s poignant emotions would mislead him. It hadn’t, days ago, in the Russian wilderness. Even if his trajectory was slightly skewed. He could only imagine the justice Aomine would bring down upon Imayoshi if he managed to squeeze the Dan.

He vented a long breath and cycled through what he knew. Kuroko had ventured alone to accost Imayoshi in the fifth temple, which stretched five stories on his right. Yesterday Aomine had persisted that Imayoshi neutralized the little shadow. While reconnoitering the capital, Momoi supplied to him over Kuroko’s radio that Susa had convened with Imayoshi shortly before. Bringing to light the dismal possibility that Kuroko had caught the schemers unawares. Though, perhaps the outlook was not so bleak.

He’d seen the electric collar around Kuroko’s neck. If all Imayoshi had to do was punch a button the voltage would definitely decommission him. From what he was able to glean, the contraption declared a larger threat than it actually posed. For all his haughty audacity, Imayoshi wouldn’t be so foolish as to dispatch the only asset to secure Aomine’s obedience. Meaning he was merely incapacitated. Detained behind closed doors while Imayoshi scrabbled to makeup time lost so that the problem could be dealt with later on.

Kuroko was alive and, if his assumptions were correct, close by.

Kagami veered right, cutting across the plaza, and hustled down the catwalk to the fifth temple.

─

Kagami stepped onto the fourth floor. After a particularly sour conference years ago, Akashi had bitterly recounted for him the unguided climb to the top of the tower, the cramped and isolated corridor as barren as a cavern, and the stuffy, windowless Dan’s office that, for all its lush and polished East-West décor, evoked a sterile totalitarian atmosphere. As he’d expected hunters
lingered inside, ushering stragglers to convene in the plaza for a headcount. The herd had thickened
the higher he'd climbed and on this level he noticed pockets of Apparitions hugging the same
plaster and wood panel walls that sheathed the other temples. Clearly unsympathetic to the
hunter’s urgency, more interested in hushed discussion than complying with protocol.

He weaved through the folding halls, keeping his gaze tilted low, ears open. He caught snatches of
the Fire vanguard’s southern advance, concerns of temporary relocation for civilians, passive-
aggressive criticisms of Imayoshi’s lackadaisical approach to the Rus-Ainu’s long-laid threats,
distress over the emergency draft, and contention to military ineffectiveness. Nothing he didn’t
already know.

The route doglegged and as he rounded the corner a crowd clogged the way. He drifted close and
strained to hear but was unable to filter the chatter.

Nearby, a band of juvenile Apparitions talked among themselves. Occasionally one would pop onto
their tiptoes as if trying to grab onto some new shred of gossip material to share.

Kagami’s height provided him an unobstructed view to the end of the hall, which angled into
another switchback. Entry was blocked by a cordon of sawhorses and a pair of hunters standing
guard.

Did the Dan’s office lay deeper inside? What was the hunters’ business here?

Realization hit him.

The Dan’s office was the last place Kuroko was known to have gone.

Panic strummed his spine. Was he too late?

He side-eyed the gabbing juveniles and, after taking a moment to soothe his runaway concerns,
decided to try some crowdsourcing.

Attention ahead, and with an authoritative tone, he asked, “Aren’t these people supposed to be
evacuating to the plaza?”

One of the youngsters whipped a startled look back. Kagami did not meet their gaze.

The juvenile faced forward, adjusting the visor of the beanie capping their head. “They’re sticking
around to hear who broke into the Dan’s office.”

Interesting, Kagami thought and his anxiety ebbed a fraction.

“When did this happen,” he asked.

“I think they said sometime yesterday evening. Senior hunters have been interviewing witnesses all
morning.”

“They take anything?”

Beanie’s head canted as they stared on. “No idea.”

“I heard someone found the door busted open and reported it as a theft,” said a second juvenile,
sporting a messy topknot.

A third youngster with barely-there eyebrows added, “The handleset was broken, too.”
Sounded like breaking and entering.

“My dad said he heard that someone saw a woman carrying a man from the hallway,” Topknot said.

“Why would she be carrying someone away from the Dan’s office?” Beanie asked.

“Don’t know.” Topknot jerked a thumb back. “The witness said they say the woman lumbering out that way with a man on her back.”

Another juvenile standing a few feet ahead tipped a look back. Slightly older, female, and clad in medical scrubs. “You mean senior nurse Momoi Satsuki?”

The three youngsters stared in surprise. So did Kagami.

“She admitted a man into the infirmary last night for severe electrical burns,” Scrubs supplied, seeming to understand their interest. “He was unconscious at the time.”

“You’re a medical intern?” Beanie asked, pointing at the uniform.

Scrubs nodded. “I laid out the surgical equipment and whipped up some salve before I left but I never saw the guy’s face.”

No Brows’ eyes widened. “She carted him all the way to the second temple from here? She’s gutsy.”

Kagami chewed on the intel, the unsolicited tidbits working wonders to calm his nerves. Before Scrubs so generously contributed to the group chat, he’d overheard nothing more than thirdhand accounts. This new information provided a more refined picture. Not crystal clear. But persuasive enough that he believed the second temple worthy of a look-see. The scope of his first exploration was focused solely on the library which swallowed much, but not all, of the first and second floor.

The boisterous juveniles continued to probe Scrubs with questions.

Kagami patted Beanie’s head. “Good job. Carry on, kids.”

Then he spun around and doubled back.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

“Kagami-kun.” His voice wobbled a bit.

Kagami’s face lit up. “Good, you’re alive. How bad are you hurt?”

Kuroko couldn’t help smiling. But his elation quickly faded. He’d forgotten Momoi was lying in wait.

She sprang forward.

“Momoi-san, no.”

Chapter Notes

Second part of my two-part update! See what I mean, this one is a monster compared to what I normally post. Some events or settings where there is a lot of action usually end up as either really short or really long chapters for me. No in-between... There's a lot I can say about this chapter and at the same time I can't find the words. So all I will say is I hope you enjoy it! I may actually post another chapter tomorrow to close out this particular event/setting/whatever you wanna call it. Thanks, as always!

The sear of eye-watering antiseptic drew Kagami to the infirmary. Tucked beyond the half-walled dining area and the massive ascending stairwell he’d scaled on his last visit. He had bypassed the doorless space on his first go-through and hadn’t detected the caustic perfume. Masked by the savory and aromatic smells oozing from the then-active kitchen churning out the evening meal. Overhead fluorescents cast a harsh white glow upon walls stained like aged parchment. Three rows of pine wood benches broken by an aisle seated less than half a dozen Apparitions, heads bowed in solemn patience. No decoration, no conversation.

Two doors, one twice as wide as the other, bracketed a reception desk fronting the lobby.

No one appeared to be on duty. Those seated did not acknowledge his presence, either.

He stood in the archway and examined the obstacle. The bigger door on the right was free-swinging with porthole windows allowing a peek beyond but one he could not see from his position. Direct access to surgical preparation and operating rooms, if he had to guess. The smaller door on the left suggested restricted admittance. Lever handle, windowless, and fitted closer to the reception desk as though to dissuade curious visitors from prying. No electronic keypad or card swiper, though. For their revolutionary advancements in medicine yet conservative embracing of technology, Kagami thought the lack of security foolish.

He looked to the wider portal. Entering through there would be the easiest avenue but posed the
greatest risk of discovery. The windows benefitted him as well as any staff within that may spot him and think to question his intrusion.

His gaze swung to the left. Without a way to peek inside he had no way of knowing what lay beyond the solid narrow door. Assuming it wasn’t locked or bolted from the other side.

He shook doubt from his mind. Where one failed he would resort to the other.

Squaring his shoulders he strutted the aisle and angled left. None of those seated attempted to stop him. He gripped the handle and held his breath as he tested the lever. It gave with metallic twangs, easing inward.

He stepped into a cramped hall. A halo of light shining from distant fluorescents splashed into the darkened space. Spring hinges sealed his entry with a hydraulic hiss. Ahead, an irregularly shaped gallery unfolded like two cattycorner rectangles overlapping each other. Kagami eased into the space and hesitated at the fork in the road. Two more portals opened, reaching further in. One ahead and another on his right. So far he’d gauged his choices with careful deliberation, following the coattails of speculation and rumor to acquire clues. Instinct proved to be his most reliable tact but also his most poisonous. What had Scrubs said? *I laid out surgical equipment and whipped up some salve before I left but never saw the guy’s face.*

Kuroko was rescued by Momoi and operated on last night. Electrical burns wouldn’t demand much time under the scalpel unless there was some extensive damage to be repaired. Crafting an ointment implied that mortality was unlikely. Meaning Kuroko was either in recovery or on his way there before Scrubs left.

But which way led to the treatment room?

“Excuse me,” came a voice from behind.

Kagami started and whirled. A man draped in pale green nurse’s scrubs overlaid by a smock had emerged from one of two doors on the gallery’s rearmost wall. He held the lofty door, assisting a child as they hobbled out. Inside Kagami spotted the gleam of a mirror mounted above a pedestal sink. Must be a patient restroom.

The nurse studied him a moment. Irritation wrinkled eyes bleary with fatigue. “We’re evacuating as fast as we’re able to but we need more time to stabilize our patients and pack our equipment. I told the last one who barged in here the same thing.”

Kagami lifted calming hands. His disguise achieved its purpose. This man believed him a hunter.

“Relax,” he said. “I’m not here for you. My orders are to find someone.”

Puzzlement laced the nurse’s face as he ushered the child out of the bathroom toward the passageway on the right. The child understood the intended direction and toddled, gait impeded by a brace that clasped much of one leg.

“Who are you looking for?” the nurse asked, attention honed on the child.

He decided to dangle some bait. “You hear about the supposed break-in of the Dan’s office?”

The man halted, having been intently shadowing his patient. “You’re not seriously going to arrest our head nurse.”

Kagami shook his head and withheld emotion from displaying his excitement. Finally he’d struck
pay dirt. “We just need her to answer some questions, that’s all.”

The child stumbled, stumpy arms flailing for balance and the nurse sprung to help. He lifted the patient carefully onto his hip. “She’s been overseeing post-op care for a burn victim in treatment.” He pointed to the other outlet. “Farthest corridor, fourth door from the end on the right.”

Kagami bowed his head in appreciation, then turned and marched on.

─

Kuroko roused from sleep as a hand pressed into his chest. His eyes, dry with fatigue and stung by the acrid chemicals lacing the air, struggled to adjust. Blinking turned his sight watery but he caught the waft of lavender and a glimpse of flowing hair.

Momoi was awake, her attention glued to the cell entryway.

Gravel coated his throat and he attempted several forced swallows to soften the stiff muscles.

He inched himself onto an elbow, swiping an arm across his eyes, and covered her tense fingers with his bandaged hand.

“What is it,” he asked, voice gritty.

Without looking at him, she whispered, “I heard something. Voices, then footfalls. Heavy, like boots.”

Panic fluttered in his chest. Infirmary staff wore wax leather flats. Professional, silent, and hygienic. Patients and visitors were lent similar footwear. Momoi had subverted medical policy for moral principle, her culture for his welfare, evidenced by the stylish Oxfords he’d spotted on the floor when he’d woken earlier.

Meaning whoever was intruding either did not know this rule or did not care. Hairs on his arms and neck prickled.

Surely it couldn’t be Susa. The traitor left with his benefactor to cripple the Lightning crown. And they’d thought him dead, hadn’t they? Why else would they leave him behind? Unless Susa had not been deceived by his depreciated stated and returned to finish the job.

The tension gripping Momoi’s body told him she believed that to be the case.

“You don’t know for sure. What if it’s a hunter?”

Momoi nailed him with an intense look. “Did he check your pulse?”

The trauma distorted his memory of what had transpired once Imayoshi triggered the voltage. He did recall cold fingertips pressing into his neck.

“Briefly.”

Her mouth twitched, lips parting in a restrained snarl. She tossed her legs over the cot. He lashed to grab her but she slid away.
“Momoi-san, no,” he called, keeping his voice from escalating above a whisper.

She skittered to the portal, ducking to hug the edge.

“Doctors and nurses don’t prowl patient hallways in clunky boots, Tetsu-kun,” she said. “And Dai- chan’s hunters know better.”

Gripping her lengthy hair in one hand, she nosed a peek around the jamb then sucked back into the room. “Someone’s out there.”

In a few rough gestures, she teethed an elastic from her wrist and quickly pulled her hair back. A shimmer reflected off her hand, caught in the hazy morning light that spilled in from the narrow window above the cot. Dewy crystals frothed, stacking atop her knuckles into jagged points sharp enough to inflict a deep bite.

She couldn’t be serious.

He tried to leverage himself off the bed to stop her. Pain exploded when he thoughtlessly bore his weight on his injured hands. He stifled a yelp as he flattened to the cot.

Momoi glanced back. “Please be still and feign sleep.”

Clenching his jaw through the aftershocks, Kuroko shimmied to prop himself on up again.

“What if you’re wrong?”

She flashed him a faint smile, then her countenance firmed and she regarded the portal.

“Then I really hope whoever I hit accepts my apology.”

─

Kagami turned into the last corridor. He’d kept his steps small, studying the layout as he bypassed the first corridor. The treatment ward consisted of three bays, each a series of piggybacking cells no larger than ten feet square. No doors obstructed access which he thought to be both counter-productive to containing pathogens and invasive to patient convalescence. Just another of the Ice’s contradictory idiosyncrasies, he supposed.

He continued walking, counting down the rooms as he went. Patients occupied two cells both—thankfully—still asleep. The hunters must not have breached this far in yet.

The fifth to the last cell was empty and dread pinched his gut. His concern did not lie with Kuroko’s condition. He was more worried about Momoi’s state of mind.

His steps froze him just before the threshold of the next room. Fourth from the end on the right.

He needed to play this smart. Don’t say anything to piss her off. Don’t do anything to provoke a fight. In, out, and onto Casimir.

Tact was not his strongest skill. Cushioning his abrasive speech was even less polished.

He dragged a breath deep into his chest, held it, and exhaled slowly through the nose.
He could do this. And he believed it.

So he stepped into the shaft of stale light staining the floor.

Inside a form lay on the cot, face-up. A thin sheet was drawn up to the chin. Hesitant to barge in, he squinted.

And identified shocks of familiar pale hair.

“Kuroko?” he called.

Kuroko’s eyes popped open. He recognized that voice. The pang of fright that had flooded him with a frigid chill quickly melted away.

Not at all who he expected but he was in no position to complain.

He threw the blanket aside and leaned up, looking into the doorway.

Still dressed in the hunter’s ensemble from the day before stood Kagami Taiga. He looked worse for the wear. Eyes tired, face grimy, and body haggard. A bruise bloomed on his forehead, peeking through the prince’s messy fringe.

“Kagami-kun.” His voice wobbled a bit.

Kagami’s face lit up. “Good, you’re alive.” He trailed inside. “How bad are you hurt?”

Kuroko couldn’t help smiling.

But his elation quickly faded as he spotted movement nearby the portal. He’d forgotten Momoi was lying in wait.

Her angry eyes were zeroed in on the prince’s back. Her ice-encased fist was raised.

She sprang forward. Being both barefoot and lightweight, Kagami wouldn’t hear her coming.

He threw his hands out, knowing it would do no good to stop her, and yelled, “Momoi-san, no.”

Momoi-san? Had he heard right?

Kagami whipped around. Knuckles bearing angular glittering teeth barreled toward his chest. He wove around the strike and captured his attacker’s wrist. Scornful eyes bored into him as his grip was tested with several tugs but to no avail.

“You’re—“ Images bubbled into his mind. He’d seen her face before as an attendee of many an international conference with Imayoshi and his cadre of directors. Usually seated between Aomine and War Administrator Wakamatsu Kousuke. This woman was the ex-wife?
She lashed a second fist, ice-studded like the first, and he intercepted.

“Hold on. I’m not—“

From the cot, Kuroko called, “No, no. Kagami-kun, guard your—”

Momoi yanked her arms down. Grip still firm, his body pivoted forward and she rammed her knee into his groin. Pain ricocheted through him, weakening his legs, and his eyes watered. Against his better judgment he dropped her hands, cradled his throbbing nether regions, and sunk to his knees.

He considered the alternative. She could have just kicked him and delivered a crippling blow.

*Signing off a date between my balls and her foot.*

What good running his mouth did for him.

---

“Momoi-san, what good does attacking him do?”

Kuroko’d managed to roll himself from the cot just as she racked Kagami. He was careful this time to avoid using his hands, remembering how excruciating his last mistake was. Whether he could have physically stopped her hadn’t mattered. Her anger was dangerous, as his own personal experience reminded him and even if Kagami was not an enemy today his attack on Aomine had not been forgotten.

She had dealt Kuroko a good dose of punishment when he’d attacked Aomine thirty-four years ago. While Kagami may be only temporarily decommissioned he should consider himself lucky she hadn’t used those fists to render him a disfiguring scar to match her ex-husband’s.

Momoi bopped her knuckles together, fracturing the ice. Hard flops of her wrists sprinkled shards onto the floor.

“It satisfies me plenty,” she said, eyes on Kagami.

“I was hoping you’d have forgotten about that,” the prince groaned.

“It would have been impolite of me to forgo our appointment.”

Kagami bit his lip through what Kuroko was sure were rolling waves of gut-wrenching, nausea-inducing misery.

Momoi kneeled craning her head to peer into the prince’s drooped face. “Now, what are you doing skulking around here?”

Kuroko wondered, too. Last he recalled, he’d asked Kagami to remove Aomine from the temple and safeguard him while he contended with Imayoshi. Yesterday afternoon. He stepped to the doorway and looked to the end of the hall, sensing nothing.

“Where’s Aomine-kun?” he asked, turning back into the room.

Kagami did not reply, his concentration centered on waiting out the ache.
Momoi was not in a compassionate mindset. “I thought you got him out already. What happened?” Impatience escalated her tone as she pushed further into the prince’s personal space. “Where is Dai-chan?”

More silence. Kagami extended a hand, palm down, asking for a moment.

She did not wait and fist his collar. “Where is he? I swear, if you did anything—”

Kagami yanked her hand away. His pain-creased brow translated his frustration but she did not bend to his glare.

“Will you give me a damn minute? Using my balls for target practice just wasted time I don’t have.”

Momoi ripped free of his grip and stood. “This whole situation is your fault.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Do you really thing it wise to enrage me further?”

“And you think dredging up all of my mistakes is helping?”

Kuroko couldn’t allow for her to continue baiting Kagami. He knew she was angry and hurting. Maybe assaulting him had slaked some of her fury but Kagami far exceeded her in power, size, and experience and he couldn’t risk her provoking the prince to act.

He skated over, putting himself between them, and guided Momoi a few steps back.

“Enough,” he said to her. “You can’t nail him to the floor then demand him to rise.”

Betrayal threatened to claim her but she quickly schooled her face into the mask of begrudging calm that decades of bureaucracy had ingrained in her.

“I don’t trust him,” she whispered.

He wasn’t entirely sure he did, either. Though he may have never voiced it, he believed Kagami understood. The prince’s cooperation came as a result of guilt not indebtedness. Morality prevented Kagami from double-crossing him. And should the unforeseen occur, Kagami would be a fool to presume Kuroko would not retaliate in-kind.

However Momoi had every right to be concerned. Much time had passed and the prince’s appearance in the temple was discomfiting.

Kuroko held her gaze and gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. Hoping she would compromise. If not for him, then for the uncertainty of Aomine’s wellbeing.

She scowled, hesitant. Then bowed her head in acceptance.

He faced Kagami, who had evened his breath, his posture less hunched.

“Kagami-kun, I realize you’re in pain but please tell us. Where is Aomine-kun?”

“On his way to Casimir. Assuming he hasn’t fudged his trajectory.” Kagami rose, hand still cupping his groin. Kuroko couldn’t fault him for being wary. “Long story short, we split up less than an hour ago. He apparaated on the assumption that if it worked once, it’ll work again.”
Emotion reclaimed Momoi’s voice as she cried, “And you let him go?”

Distress pinched Kagami’s face at the rebuke. “There was no stopping him. He’s convinced himself that Imayoshi murdered Kuroko and asked that I extract you”—he pointed to her—“before the Dan has a chance to tie up another loose end.”

Incredulity flushed her face. “Why would Dai-chan—”

“Because he knows Imayoshi killed his parents. That everything in the last century was manipulated to browbeat him into complying without question. From his upbringing, to your marriage and children, down to his career path. Imayoshi controlled all of it so he could use Aomine’s inheritance to cripple the Rus-Ainu Empire. Anyone who jeopardizes that is as good as dead. Including you.”

The words vibrated through Kuroko’s brain.

By nature Aomine was capricious, leaping between activity and lethargy much like a bee among blooms. Emotions, considered by many to be his driving force, were chambered in thick walls bound by flimsy mortar. Imayoshi’s imperfect masonry was fracturing, proven by the bizarre displays of anger, aggression, and violence Aomine had exhibited in the last week. If his partner allowed himself to be overtaken by rage and loss, in light of Imayoshi’s heinous treachery, there was no doubt in Kuroko’s mind what the penalty would be.

He met Momoi’s stare and saw the same apprehension holding her eyes.

“We have to stop Aomine-kun.”

“You’re unfit to teleport,” she said.

Kagami stepped back to the wall abutting the doorway and pressed his shoulder to the timber.

“And just how the hell are you planning to transport two people?” the prince grunted.

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” he said to Kagami.

“I forbid it.” The command in Momoi’s tone surprised Kuroko. It’d been many years since she’d been so curt with him.

But he wasn’t going to back down. “What other option is there? Surely you realize if Aomine-kun is as vengeful as Kagami-kun claims there is a very real possibility he’ll kill Imayoshi.” Despair pitched his voice, breaking loose some of the gravel in his throat. “He’ll rot in jail, Momoi-san. And that’s if the temple doesn’t execute him first.”

Conflict etched deep grooves in her face as she said, in a choked tone, “I will not risk your mortality on hasty assurances. There has to be another way.”
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

“If I am forbidden to teleport and Kagami-kun is unable to transport us all, then how are we supposed to leave this place and still stop Aomine-kun?”

A man filled the entryway. “I think I can help with that.”

Chapter Notes

BAM! Another update! Not much editing was necessary for this chapter and given that it's a close follow-up to the last, there was no reason not to squeeze it in before the end of the week. :) I'm still chugging along to complete the drafts for the last chapters to finally wrap this bad boy up, so expect those in the near future.

Thank you, as always!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tension weighed the room as Kuroko and Momoi stared each other down, conviction enflaming their eyes. The objective between the three of them was the same. To intervene and save Aomine from himself. En route to Goryokaku, Kagami had toyed with several scenarios to land him in Casimir as quickly as possible once he secured Momoi. While he may not have believed Kuroko dead he hadn’t factored the prospect of escorting an extra body across the border into Bokoku. Especially an invalid.

He examined Kuroko, noting the substitution of gauze bandaging in place of that dreadful shock collar. But he also noticed something peculiar about the shadow’s posture. After rising from the cot, Kuroko had kept his hands shielded from sight. Had they been damaged somehow? If so, that posed a greater complication.

Teleportation superseded the Lightning Apparition’s unique skill of apparating as the fastest instantaneous travel method, so long as the opacity of available darkness exceeded 60%. And unlike apparating, non-Shadow Apparitions could be teleported. So long as they held the transporter’s hand. It was how Kuroko had expedited their arrival to Goryokaku the day before from the fort on the Lightning-Ice border. If Kuroko couldn’t use his hands, then it wouldn’t matter if Momoi objected. There was no vehicle for transport without him. Period.

Kagami kneaded his forehead. How the hell was he supposed to get these two into the custody of Akashi’s officers in Bokoku? Mounting the elk with Aomine yesterday had been a risk, their combined weight double what government regulations declared acceptable for the familiar’s size. Three riders was just unthinkable. Sending the two off alone was not a viable alternative, either. What if they were intercepted by the Fire vanguard and mistaken for combatants? Wartime doctrine between Fire and Ice had always been kill first, think later. Making two trips? A waste of crucial time and energy, and risk of exposure to whomever he left behind.
No. The only way to untie his hands was to extract them together. And they needed to brainstorm and decide on a tack before the hunter’s evacuation rounds reached the treatment ward.

Which reminded him.

“Whatever you decide,” his interruption wrangled their attention and he pointed at Momoi. “You can’t stick around if you intend to keep an eye on him.”

Her brow scrunched.

“The hunters are investigating reports claiming someone broke into the Dan’s office sometime yesterday evening. Interviews with witnesses identified a woman who was toting a man from the scene. Problem is, one of them knows it’s you because she was on duty that night. It’s only a matter of time before they’re notified and sweep this place.”

She grimaced and tossed her head back as the realization seeped in. “Which you would know because you searched the last place Tetsu-kun went. Which was drawing rubberneckers because of the presence of hunters. And because of your disguise, information flowed freely from whomever you asked. But you wouldn’t approach an adult or anyone remotely near your eye level who would notice the color and raise the alarm.” Her chin dropped, her earlier hostility gone. “I’m guessing it was children.”

“Something like that.”

Frustration and hopelessness contorted their faces and Kagami couldn’t dismiss the twinge of responsibility he felt. He hadn’t wanted to distract their focus but he absolutely could not afford hunters probing the halls in search of Momoi, knowing they would arrest her on sight. Spotting him would not attract suspicion, as the nurse earlier had told him about the first hunter to drop by. If their sources led them here and he attempted in any way to inconvenience their operation, they would no doubt question his motives. He needed to retain anonymity and not incapacitating anyone who may see through his screen would accomplish that. His transgressions were mounting as it was but so long as he protected his movements they would never come to light.

One less thing for Akashi to hold over his head.

“If I am forbidden to teleport,” Kuroko said to Momoi, “and Kagami-kun is unable to transport us all, then how are we supposed to leave this place and still stop Aomine-kun?”

Soft footfalls scraped at the threshold. Kagami jumped from the wall and whirled, fighting the impulse to hunch into the ghostly pangs of residing ache. Momoi slid in front of Kuroko.

A man filled the entryway. The head was concealed beneath the hood of a snug lightweight jacket. Slim cargo trousers hugged lean legs and rubber-soled work boots sheathed the feet.

The cowl was shoved back, revealing a familiar face.

Izuki Shun.

The spymaster smiled. “I think I can help with that.”

Kagami gaped. “What-how-why are you here?”

A twinkle of amusement shone in the master’s eyes at his bewilderment.

“Happened to be in the area on business.”
He didn’t like the undertones that *business* implied.

“I’m guessing of the red-headed midget variety.”

Izuki’s smile widened.

Kagami sneered and growled under his breath, ”Akashi.”

Kuroko shuffled out from behind Momoi. “Izuki-senpai.”

Izuki turned his gaze to the murmur and his face adopted a paternal glow. Kuroko withdrew into himself, seemingly bothered by the expression. He discreetly hid his wrapped hands and ducked his head to obscure from view the bandages winding his neck.

“It’s good to see you.”

Kuroko’s lips inched into a broken smile.

Kagami wondered about the junior shadow’s reservations in front of the man he adored like a father. After thirty-four years apart, he expected a more emotional reunion. But neither man yielded.

“Are you hurt?” Izuki asked.

Momoi’s posture loosened but she again edged herself between Kuroko and the spymaster, clearly distrustful.

“He’s due for surgery this morning,” she said, pausing. “Or, he was.”

“You can fill me in once we get there. Grab his clothes, records, and any medications.”

She did not move.

“Time is a factor.”

She looked to Kagami.

He nodded. “He’s right. Kuroko is priority now. Get his stuff.”

She appraised Izuki with fleeting indecision. Emotional attachment wrestling against professional medical ethics. Kagami appreciated her skepticism and her intense devotion to protecting those she loved. But he hoped she would be rational and widen her perspective. If Akashi had sent his chief lapdog to safeguard passage for them into Bokoku, their immunity was guaranteed. Not to mention unrestricted access to the much-needed immediate medical treatment that, at present in the temple, would be unavailable to Kuroko if the hunters got a hold of either of them.

Finally she jerked her head in a nod.

She turned to the trunk at the foot of the cot, propped the lid open, and rummaged inside.

Chapter End Notes

sorry if you're happy with pun-savvy Izuki but i fail hardcore at them... (plus it's not
even the right climate for puns, i think? lol)

Glossary of Terms:

APPARATE: the endemic skill of Lightning Apparitions to assimilate with naturally-occurring electrical currents (similar to the Shadow’s teleportation and the Fire’s immersion)

TELEPORT: the endemic skill of Shadow Apparitions to submerge into darkness where the opacity exceeds 60%

GORYŌKAKU: the capital of the Ice state of Shi Tudi; Aomine, Momoi, and Imayoshi live here

HIROSAWA: the capital of the Fire state of Bokoku; Akashi and Kagami live here

CASIMIR: the capital of the Lightning state of Pervobytnyy Les; Hyuuga and Aomine’s father hail from here
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

“You never learn,” Akashi muttered.

Akashi spun, charged arm cocked, static tangling two extended fingers.

Imayoshi screamed, “Susa.”

Akashi hurled the bolt.

Chapter Notes

It's that time of year! When free time funnels down the drain to make room for family gatherings, holiday shopping, parties, vacations, and making some end-of-the-year dough.

....Aaaand having to share a laptop charger with my sister because my asshole cat chewed through mine out of some kind of hangry revenge, idk. Now that I have a replacement, I'm back for a short time to update before a well-deserved vacay. I will be working as hard as I can to crank out a chapter a week. This flippant hot/cold weather in Florida is draining the life from me in such an unexpected way. One day it's a comfortable 77, the next there's ice on my car and I need a down jacket... Ridiculous. ANYWAY, please enjoy another installment of TWCH

Imayoshi slumped against the fountain, chest dragging for a solid breath. Susa lay on the stones fifty feet away, clutching his shoulder. Rage and pain clenched the assassin’s face but Imayoshi detected something else in the deep grooves darkening the eyes. Something he never believed he would see.

Vulnerability.

When Akashi reopened the assault he acted with the same calculated lethality. As if he regularly dueled multiple opponents with self-imposed handicaps. Chunks of ice clung to Imayoshi’s skin, fractured easily after he sparred with the Lord. A deep ache permeated his bones and his fingers had yet to stop quivering. As if to punctuate his imminent victory and extract maximum torment, the masochistic prick had drilled a third targeted kick into his chest that again planted him to the ground.

Thereafter Akashi dealt with Susa whom he’d been fending off with darts of needle-thin lightning transmitted off the daggers still embedded in his flesh. Imayoshi hadn’t calculated the overall damage, concentrating then on prying himself from the stones with the aid of the fountain.

Next he looked, his accomplice was facedown with a cloud of static evaporating from his flattened form.
Akashi now stood in the upper quad, near the first opening in the colonnaded walk. The daggers had done little to impede his efficiency. If anything, they served as an unprecedented expedient. He rolled his shoulders, crinkly fibers splintering down his limbs and escaping skyward off the weapon handles. Blood oozed from scrapes scoring his left cheek.

Displeasure twisted Imayoshi’s face. He couldn’t even feel satisfied for pounding the little bastard’s face. The Lord was deliberately decorating his body with evidence to reinforce his powerlessness. A trap Imayoshi and Susa haplessly barreled into, their clumsy offense doing everything to implicate their association.

Susa pushed himself onto his knees. He still held his injured shoulder, the arm dangling. Between taut fingers, blood leaked from a pen-sized hole bored through the man’s leather jacket. Imayoshi didn’t think he would have ever witnessed this warrior in such a depreciated state. By Akashi’s hand, no less.

The Lord wasn’t paying the shadow any mind as though he’d already determined Susa a problem eliminated.

Now his sights were set on Imayoshi. Akashi started walking toward him, a slight hitch to his gait. With Susa put down, he was all that stood to oppose the Lord from seizing the day.

He couldn’t help but wonder though. What was with all the theater?

Movement behind Akashi snagged his attention. Inky rivulets crept through the grout, slithering toward the Lord. Imayoshi followed the stream to the pool of shadows where his associate knelt. Resolute eyes burned beneath a scrunched, sweat-pebbled brow.

Susa motioned to Akashi. He still intended to fight?

Akashi stopped. Less than ten feet away.

Lightning skittered down his neck and arms.

The shadows inched closer.

More electric ribbons coursed the Lord’s body.

Imayoshi’s breath stilled. Ice patching his arms hardened into quill-thin points. Ready to do what was needed of him.

If but for one last time.

“You never learn,” Akashi muttered.

The bristling current raced to the Lord’s tense right hand. Fiery eyes darted over his shoulder.

To Susa.

Panic clutched Imayoshi’s muscles.

Akashi spun, charged arm cocked, static tangling two extended fingers.

Imayoshi lashed his arm and screamed, “Susa, go.”

Akashi hurled the bolt. A deafening sound, like canon fire, slammed his ear drums. Neon orange light stung his eyes, reducing his vision to a murky blur. Overhead a grumble of thunder faded.
Imayoshi collapsed onto the fountain and hurriedly pushed up his glasses to wipe clear his sight. He squinted into the quad where the shadow had been demobilized.

A fist-sized hole punched the ground. Singe marks dusted the stones and debris sprinkled the puncture. Was it just more evidence? Or was the Lord seriously aiming to kill? Hard to say.

But Susa was gone.

His attention locked on Akashi. The Lord’s body was frozen in a posture of attack. Torso twisted, legs parted in a lunge, and right arm stretched, two extended fingers pointing for the hole. Dozens of spines sprouted from the man’s back, shoulder, right arm, and both legs. The icy sharps were solid and sleek, measuring between four and six inches long. More than enough to penetrate muscle and interrupt movement.

Stress deflated from the Lord’s body with a slow sigh and he drew upright. Easing his arms to his sides, he turned to Imayoshi with puppet-like stiffness. Discomfort pinched his face, eyes hot with insult.

Good, he hoped his needles struck a few nerves.

“You realize,” Akashi said, “you’re digging your own grave.”

Imayoshi huffed a laugh. He tried again to push himself off the fountain but his strength had not yet returned from the Lord’s earlier attack. Instead he settled for sitting back on his knees.

“What is the point of all this?” he asked.

Akashi said nothing.

He straightened the frames and looked up. “You want me gone and you’ve collected more than enough evidence to frogmarch me before any one of the court judges you have in your back pocket. Better yet you could just kill me as a casualty of this bogus war that you started. Yet you’ve neglected every opportunity to end this even though you’ve obviously staged this altercation to fit your objective, whatever that may be.” He glared. “Don’t give me any of those sanctimonious morality and principles excuses you’re so fond of, either.”

The Lord’s face betrayed nothing and after a brief silence, he said, “I’d love nothing more than to exterminate your parasitic influence from this world. But I cannot. You’re useless to me dead. Don’t fret, Imayoshi. Your punishment is coming and when it does, you’ll wish I had killed you myself.”

The words buried deep in his brain, provoking more questions than existed answers and a foreboding darkness blanketed his thoughts. If Akashi wasn’t here to finish him and all that had happened was a carefully orchestrated distraction, then who was he waiting for? Who was the executioner?

He doubted Akashi would tell him, but couldn’t help asking, “Who is it?”

Akashi smirked, bring an arm around his stomach. Imayoshi wondered if the display was an honest revelation of pain or another exaggeration.

“Still so accustomed to being spoon-fed, aren’t you?”
Imayoshi sneered. “Screw you.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Aomine stared at the palace and a barrage of questions invaded his thoughts.

Was Imayoshi really somewhere within those walls? Would he be able to confront his uncle with the confidence required to wring out the truth? Could he even handle it? And would it finally resolve the insurmountable melancholy that filled him?

Would Imayoshi even admit to his wrongdoings?

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! Did you have a good holiday (and time off work, whew!)? Even through the festivities (and awkward friends of family gatherings, ew amirite), I didn't forget about this and spent time pecking away at the keyboard to punch out drafts for the last chapters to come.

This chapter's a bit of a shorty, as I'm only able to do a quick edit. But I have more queued up for drafting and editing. Time will be in short supply now that I'm back on the work grind, but we're almost there! The conclusion to TWCH is coming, as well as a little something extra ;)

As always, thank you and I hope you enjoy!

Aomine’s legs rattled as his boot soles struck down on hard earth. He kept his eyes closed tight as prickly needles pulsed throughout him. That same vibrating numbness. Ascending from his feet into his chest and expelling from his shoulders and head. Sensation crept back, the fading grumble of thunder tickling his ears. He lowered to his knees, working his vision clear, and waited for the bothersome feeling to leave.

He surveyed the area.

Bricks arranged in a mosaic array of pastel pinks, greens, and yellows fanned outward from the magnificent façade of Casimir Palace. Marble statues, wrought iron lampposts, hooded trash receptacles, and wood benches interspersed the plaza. Multi-storied buildings scaled with mottled slate shingles rose in packed huddles beyond a segmented half-wall frothing with azalea, carnation, and ferns.

Aomine hefted himself up and shook the tingling from each leg. Not a single Apparition inhabited the square. More than that, he observed that not a trace of Imayoshi’s supposed insurrection existed. What happened to overthrowing the monarchy? He stared at the palace and a barrage of questions invaded his thoughts.

Was Imayoshi really somewhere within those walls? Would he be able to confront his uncle with the confidence required to wring out the truth? Could he even handle it? And would it finally resolve the insurmountable melancholy that filled him?
Would Imayoshi even admit to his wrongdoings?

He shook away the distraction and trotted to the palace portico. Fortunately, the Lightning’s obsession with organization and symmetry extended into the capital’s architecture. A wide lane cleaving the plaza into two lobes provided Aomine an unobstructed path.

He easily bound up the squatty stairs and approached the massive doors. He slowed, noticing something off. One of the two slabs was wedged open. Wide enough to accommodate a body to slip through. Someone was definitely here.

But was it Imayoshi? One way to find out.

He slid inside. The lobby gleamed from the immense overhead chandelier washing the polished marble in a celestial glow. His gaze ascended the risers of the grand staircase to the railing of the second floor that overlooked the lobby.

No one.

He swept a look first into the Drawing Room, then the War Gallery. Empty. Except for some disorderly furniture, scattered papers, and nearly-invisible scuffs streaking the floor. Seemed the capital was cleared out in a hurry.

Where should he begin his search? He wasn’t very familiar with the intricate layout of the palace, his knowledge mostly limited to snapshots of the second floor where he and Imayoshi several times past conducted diplomatic missions. From his introductory tour many years ago he recalled that, contrary to the Lightning’s insatiable appetite for order, the palace’s interior was structurally asymmetrical. Galleries, halls, exhibits, parlors, and diplomatic venues dominated half of the ground floor while the other supported a hodgepodge of guest apartments, recreation rooms, and the dining hall and kitchen. On the other hand, the second floor was almost entirely devoted to the ruling Kaizer’s lifestyle, both private and political, with an array of vast angular salons, conference rooms, and vestibules. Too much space to cover, and too many rooms to search.

He looked to the rear of the lobby where two arches opened opposite each other. Another tidbit from the tour surfaced. Pitting the palace and unfolding twelve thousand square feet was an impressive courtyard. Bracketed by an H-shaped peristyle that bisected the enclosure into two quads, and from the wall of the upper quad bulged a gurgling fountain. Devoid of benches or tables, and lacking in decoration, the courtyard somehow possessed a mystifying allure that attracted students, politicos, and academicians that frequented Casimir.

Aomine felt drawn to investigate, sensing something inside. He cut across the glossy tiles, around the unfurling staircase, to the right archway. Snatches of conversation reached his ears. Distant and unintelligible but definitely originating from somewhere in the courtyard. He stepped into the east arcade, a reverse-L margined by a waist-high wall topped with bland columns and pointed arches. He slid into cover behind the nearest column, not wanting to expose himself to any unknowns. Someone had breached the palace and until he could identify them he could only presume the intruder was a problem. He squinted through the maze of pillars, scanning for something but was unable to filter through the congestion.

“—and when it does, you’ll wish I had killed you myself.”

He recognized the voice immediately. Superior, measured, confident.

What was Akashi Seijuuroh doing here?
More than that, he wanted to know who the Lord was speaking to.

He leaned around the column to attempt another look but could see nothing from his vantage point. Frustration set in and he decided to risk it. He crept from cover, steps quick but core tight to quiet his steps.

Apart from the tinkling fountain, silence prevailed.

He rounded the corner, entering the arcade’s long stretch. A cursory glance revealed no bodies in the lower quad, so he set his eyes for the upper. As he eased toward the next pillar a figure materialized.

He ducked back, taking a few seconds to tame his panging heart, then edged a peek through the colonnaded walk into the upper quad. Distance muddled the fine details but he was able to determine the figure was Akashi. There was no mistaking that hair. The Lord was facing the east arcade, positioned between the walk and the fountain. At least from his vantage, he could spot no one else in attendance.

Thirty feet separated him from the descending steps into the courtyard. Impatience was mounting, threatening to overtake him.

“Who is it?” A new voice, raspy with Kansai-ben.

Aomine’s heart shuddered and blood rushed to his head. So Imayoshi’s incursion had succeeded.

He searched through the crowd of pillars into the quad again.

“Still so accustomed to being spoon-fed, aren’t you?” Akashi said.

“Screw you,” Imayoshi spat.

Aomine retracted his attention to the Lord, feeling agitation rising to dangerous levels. What had Kagami told him? *Use your damn head.*

He hated to admit it but the prick was right. He couldn’t go off the rails again. Especially in front of Akashi.

He studied the Lord, noticing his posture. More precisely, the direction of his gaze. Angled down as though he were addressing a small child. Or, considering the battle-exhausted slouch, a foe on their knees. If the sovereigns had duked it out before Aomine arrived it worked more to his advantage. Prying what he wanted from his traitorous uncle would be effortless if Akashi could not pose a challenge.

Not that Aomine would afford him a chance to intervene.

He stepped from cover and strutted to the stairs.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Kuroko stared at the back of the warrior kneeling before him and a thunderous question echoed in his brain that he could not tune out.

Why wasn’t Izuki angry?

Chapter Notes

Happy Sunday! And happy update! (honestly sundays aren't happy for me, they're the day i forget to pack my meals and do my laundry before another soul crushing week of work ;~ ; ) I'm hoping to better utilize my time this upcoming week to edit the remaining chapters, since I have an event on Saturday that'll suck up all my free time. (on a side note, I've just seen the newly-released promo posters for SNK season 3 and am SO STOKED that I've been re-reading the imminent material to refamiliarize myself)
At any rate, thanks as always and I hope you enjoy! <3

Izuki stepped from the blackness, grip firm on Kuroko’s exposed forearm. Momoi clasped his other arm, having been pulled free first. Probably to assist Izuki in stabilizing him. Both inched him from the gloom. He kept one eye closed as he shuffled into the dimly lit space, the polished wood beneath his bare feet lukewarm.

Gaze lowered, senses slowly orienting, he realized Momoi was also lacking footwear. The weightless void of the shadows lifted, the ethereal pressure of gravity settling on his skin and sinking into his legs. Strength drained from his knees. Muscles vibrated with strain. A sudden flush of nausea lapped his brain.

Seeming to perceive his imminent collapse, Izuki and Momoi steadied him.

“Feeling some vertigo?” Izuki asked.

Kuroko sealed his eyes. It only concentrated the feeling.

He mumbled, “Got lightheaded.”

Momoi adjusted the drawstring bag on her shoulder and palmed his forehead. Before absconding the temple, she had stuffed it with his clothes from the day before, his records, and two prescription medications.

“You’re a little warm,” she said.

He was pleased that she’d calmed down.
“To be fair, your hands are cold.”

His quip went ignored, her stern expression unbroken but for a touch of worry in her eyes.

“Reintroduced gravity could alter blood flow to more than just his head,” Izuki said.

Understanding the implication, Momoi gently grasped and examined his hands. Then she tipped his chin up to inspect his neck.

“Nothing that I can see offhand but the sooner he’s put under the better we’ll all feel.”

The spymaster gestured and Momoi relieved him, her arms firming as she supported Kuroko. The vertigo lingered like an aftertaste and though he could feel his legs Kuroko wasn’t about to profess that he could stand unattended yet. A concussion was the last thing he needed.

“He shouldn’t be walking.” Izuki turned, back to them, and crouched. “I’ll carry him.”

Kuroko stiffened. He knew it was foolish to question the spymaster’s motives but he couldn’t help feeling unworthy of such charity. Surely Izuki long ago deduced that the shadow mentioned in Aomine’s Neutral assassination contract was him. At any time in the last thirty-four years he could have contested the Dan’s incident report. Demanded proof of death or challenged Imayoshi’s refusal to turn over the corpse even though he had complied to protocol for the others who’d fallen to Aomine.

Though he was not without blame for instigating radio silence. While he stewed with humiliation and incense over his failure, trudging in accompaniment with his newly assigned benefactor, he’d adamantly refused to speak. He was not without the resources available to dispatch a distress signal to Hirosawa. At the time the Ice had been beleaguered in rhythmic cadence by the Fire in the south and antagonized by the Lightning in the north. The Wolf Pack Pact had not yet been enacted but even with an active military, the temple’s security was still a laughable hurdle he could have easily overcome. Still he neglected to uphold the oath he swore to his nation when he was awarded the coveted badge of Grade-A assassin. And furthermore he’d ignored the long-standing filial bond forged between him and Izuki. The yoke of shame and incompetence, of emotional weakness, had kept him complacently tethered to Aomine’s side for more than three decades.

Because the degrading service he would undertake as a slave was more acceptable than returning home a disgraced man.

He stared at the back of the warrior kneeling before him and a thunderous question echoed in his brain that he could not tune out.

Why wasn’t Izuki angry?

Momoi gave his arm a gentle squeeze and started him from his thoughts.

“Please, Tetsu-kun.”

He resigned himself to be slowly guided onto his once-ago master’s back. Izuki hooked his legs once he touched down. Standing with ease, the spymaster situated him and secured the hold. Fuzzy memories of sunny afternoons on the jaunting hillocks of the valleys enveloping Hirosawa trickled into his brain. He shut his eyes tight. Somehow hoping it would blank out the traces.

Like Izuki said, elevated blood pressure would complicate his condition and reminiscing about what once was helped no one.
Izuki led Momoi from the patch of shadows and Kuroko took in the room. They had emerged in a utility closet, dim lighting radiating from suspended fluorescent fixtures. Stainless steel racks packed with linens, tubs, bins, boxes, and an array of colorful bottles filed in two neat columns of five rows. Lacquered timber sheeted the walls. Parquet herringbone buffed to a sleek polyurethane shine scaled the floor.

As they weaved through the racks, Kuroko dropped his cheek to Izuki’s shoulder. A familiar smell, like burning wood, filled his nostrils. Teasing and plucking at suppressed memories. Even with bandaged hands he fought the impulse to embrace this man the way he did in his youth.

Momoi wove around Izuki as they approached the exit.

Izuki jostled his leg and whispered to him, “You’ll be all right.”

He said nothing. It’d been too long since he’d heard or been spoken to in his mother tongue.

They entered a hallway. The same fluorescent glow diffused evenly off the maple-paneling from more overhead fixtures. Murmurs of dialed down conversation filtered from nearby. Phones trilled. Papers slapped, crinkled, and shuffled.

So, Izuki landed them inside Hirosawa’s medical annex.

“This way, Momoi-san.”

Izuki turned left, taking point again, and jogged, arms pinning Kuroko’s leg down to minimize discomfort. He closed his eyes, finding some relief. Fleshy thumping accompanying the master’s footfalls told him Momoi was in tow. They ran for what felt like a full minute, every second stoking his brain from a dull ache to enraged throbbing. Izuki again called for Momoi, pace slowing. Hinges squeaked as what sounded like swinging doors were forced open. Cool air splashed his skin. Soft mechanical beeps pinged in an off-key song. Herbal disinfectants stained the air with a stringent odor of vinegar, thyme, and lemongrass. The clamor of busied staff from before had deafened. Nausea was kneading his brain at the unpleasant cocktail of smells and sounds, warning that he keep his vision dark. Curiosity spoke louder and he cracked his eyes open.

Izuki was striding down an aisle lined with beds where more than a dozen patients lay either asleep, resting, or under attention from a staff member. Through a squint, Kuroko spotted three attending nurses. Six spaces down was an empty mattress and Izuki slotted in. Momoi rounded the other side.

The spymaster dropped to sit on the edge and released his legs. Momoi cupped his shoulders from behind as Izuki spun to assist her as they guided Kuroko to lie down.

“Excuse me,” one of the nurses called. “This is a convalescence area only.”

Kuroko cringed at the authoritative tone, magnified by his agitated brain. Izuki and Momoi ignored the intervener and finished situating him.

“Bag, please, Momoi-san.”

Again he opened his eyes. The sting of light was less offensive but still annoying.

Momoi shrugged off the sack and pushed it into Izuki’s waiting hand. She stooped over him, adjusting the pillows, and began a quick examination. The spymaster rifled through the bag.

The nurse stomped to the end of the bed. “You’re not cleared to be back here.”
Izuki’s searching arm stilled and he pinned the woman with a glare. “There an ortho on-call around here?”

The nurse’s face flushed with confusion and she darted a look to Kuroko. Momoi had re-checked his temperature and taken his blood pressure. Now she was inspecting the gauze winding his neck.

The woman motioned. “What happened?”

Izuki yanked a mint green folder, slightly bowed, from the sack.

“You want to interrogate me or do you want to do your job?” he snapped, not giving her a chance to answer. “Grab me an orthopedic surgeon and an OR now.”

Challenge tweaked the nurse’s face. “On whose authority?”

The commotion hooked all eyes in the room. Across the aisle another caretaker dressed in a darker ensemble stepped around a patient bed and marched to a phone mounted on the wall beside the doublewide swinging doors.

Izuki plunged a hand into his pocket and produced a tri-folded sheet that he jerked open and offered her. “Lord Akashi Seijuurou’s order.”

Momoi balked, whirling in surprise. Kuroko was equally astonished.

Izuki never resorted to namedropping.

The nurse did not accept the page, the threat clearly rocking her perpetuated stubbornness. She flagged the caretaker at the phone and blabbered a frantic string of jargon that was lost on Kuroko.

She turned to Izuki. “They’re paging him now. What’ve you got?”

Izuki flashed the file just beyond her reach. “Ninety-seven year old Shadow Apparition. Electrical burns to the throat and hands. Possible amputations, definite cosmetic surgery.”

The nurse made an attempt to snatch the records but Izuki deflected her.

Unperturbed by the rejection, she continued, “Any prior treatments?”

“This morning at the infirmary in Goryokaku.”

A critical look came to her face. “What was a Shadow—”

“Why is unimportant.”

Obviously annoyed, she seemed to acknowledge his mounting impatience. Her eyes briefly swept over Kuroko.

“Bandages suggest that urgency was not high on the temple physician’s list of concerns.”

Izuki’s response was quick. “His first surgery was last night. The procedure was aborted.”

Frustration oozed from the nurse. “What for?”

“We removed a high-voltage torture collar from his neck,” Momoi chimed in. “His fingers were melded to it.”
The nurse appraised her with more forgiving eyes than she had Izuki and Kuroko watched in amazement as the two women held a silent conversation. A moment later and the nurse bobbed her head.

Momoi took that as a cue to explain. “He spiked a fever as we were disinfecting the wounds. Mutilation to the fingers varies from minor scarring to deep tissue corrosion. At least two fingers are definite amputations.”

“What’s his treatment history?” the nurse asked.

“Wheeled him in around 7:30 yesterday evening. I would estimate about three hours lapsed between the initial injury and his admittance to the ward.”

“Post-op?”

“A sedative and anti-inflammatories,” Momoi said. “Vitals were logged every half hour and recuperation was overseen by me. I haven’t had a chance to re-apply new bandages since his emergency discharge.”

The nurse regarded Izuki. “You’ll need to chaperone her.” She gestured. “And I’ll need that record.”

“Can’t and no way,” he said.

The room’s doublewide doors were thrown open. A group of men skated in, clad in pasty green scrubs. Enshornced in the pack, like a flower being overtaken by weeds, was a stumpy man. As they neared the bed, the nurse backed away.

Izuki slid to intercept them.

“You the surgeon?” he asked the little man.

“You must be the lunatic harassing these patients,” Stumpy grunted.

He displayed the file. “Name’s Izuki Shun. Lord Akashi’s chief lapdog. Clear your schedule, we’ve got a job for you.”

Stumpy cocked a thick brow and accepted the records. The surgeon’s eyes traced the page with expertise, plucking information similarly to how Kuroko many times witnessed Momoi skim medical records. Skepticism evaporated from the little man’s face, replaced by a professional seriousness. Stumpy crooked a finger over his shoulder then pointed to the cot. The men flanking him rushed to encircle the bed. Momoi sprang back, swiping the drawstring bag.

The bed gave a metallic clunk, wheel locks releasing.

With one man on either side and a third steering from the head, the surgeon’s posse pushed the bed into the aisle.

Izuki snagged Stumpy’s arm as he turned to lead the men from the room. A stern halting hand warned the assistants to wait. They obeyed and Kuroko craned to peek.

The spymaster again flashed the trifolded page bearing Akashi’s signature. “Let’s get one thing straight.” Without looking away, he curled his fingers at Momoi and she sidled close. “This is Momoi Satsuki. She is this patient’s medical proxy. No decision is to be executed without her express consent. You will give her full disclosure. You will listen to what she has to say and you
will respect her medical opinions regarding this patient. If I find out you dishonored our agreement
by alerting the MPs to have her removed or that you overrode her judgment with your own,” he
pointed to the stethoscope draping the surgeon’s neck, “I will drag you to jail by that ridiculous
instrument.”

Although the words were flat, the promise of retribution they carried was loud and clear. Fear and
insult pulled at the surgeon’s face as he struggled to accept. He cast a glance at Momoi, who had
sustained an undisturbed mien.

Izuki snapped his fingers in Stumpy’s face. “Look at me, not her. Do you understand?”

The man’s head gave a rickety nod. Izuki’s glare refocused on the men surrounding the bed. One
Kuroko recognized from his youth. Before his self-confidence and maturity had blossomed. Eyes
that doled out encouragement when he was unsure, pride when he succeeded, disappointment
when he erred, and affection when loneliness and isolation latched tight and drug him into the thick
mire of depression. A paternal gaze.

Heads bobbed compliance without hesitation.

Izuki stepped aside, handing over the folded sheet and tossing his head to the doors.

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” he told the surgeon.

The men wove the bed around Izuki and a sudden burst of emotions ricocheted through Kuroko.
He knew Kagami was waiting at Goryokaku, the objective to intercept and retrieve Aomine
absolutely crucial. But he did not want Izuki to disappear.

He threw an arm out, clumsily knuckling the spymaster’s shoulder. Pain bristled beneath the
bandages and he yelped. The bed jerked to a stop.

Izuki gently grasped his arm and draped it over his belly.

His vision became dewy as Izuki stooped over. A faint smile pitted thin lips. Gentle fingers
brushed back his fringe.

“It’ll be okay, I promise. When you wake up, I will be here and Aomine will be safely in our
custody.”

His chest hiccupped and he fought to control himself. “Izuki-senpai, I’m—”

Izuki bent closer, gliding a thumb along his eyebrow.

And planted a kiss. Just above his eye.

Tears budded, rippling his vision and with the thread-bare tatters of his self-control willed himself
not to break.

Izuki straightened, hand sliding away.

“Not yet, sprenkeln. But soon. We’ll talk as much as you want.”

The spymaster stepped out of view and the wheels squealed as the men worked the bed down the
aisle.

Kuroko squeezed his eyes shut and surrendered to the building pressure in his head and chest.
Coaxing him to feel. To acknowledge his master’s unspoken words.
The kiss was an ancient gesture of adoration, surviving more than five thousand years of exploration, warfare, political alliances and dissolutions, societal and cultural adaptations, socio-economic development, and the complete reconstruction of their national infrastructure after a white-knuckling 300-year campaign of genocide. It was an unchangeable, universal, and unique sentiment that not even the Shadow’s punitive integration into the Rus-Ainu fold could hope to erase.

*I love you.*

The bed veered right, wobbling with inertia and plowed through the swinging doors. Cool air rolled over him and the earlier noises of bustling staffers and visitors filtered back in, eclipsed by the frantic chatter of the men surrounding him.

Momoi’s bare feet pattering the polished floor penetrated the commotion. Knowing she would be with him helped to soothe the flood of anxiety he felt at Izuki’s absence.

The sensation of the master’s warmth may have vanished but the assurance of a second chance remained, clutched tight in Kuroko’s chest.

He squashed down the dread pitting his gut and hoped.

That once he awoke he could finally rekindle the love he desperately missed.

From the father he’d always had.

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**Chapter End Notes**

**Points of Clarification**

* Kuroko attacked Aomine on-contract in 1972, approximately 34 years ago, while he and Momoi were still married but living apart.

* Kuroko, as a grade-A assassin, is multilingual, which is why he can speak both Ice and Fire languages, as well as his *mother tongue*, the languages spoken in the Shadow homeland of Selene. He never grasped English because his station does not require he do so.

* MPs (military police) are the law-enforcing organization of Bokoku; there are no separate palace guards or security officers in charge of maintaining civil order and enforcing the law. Just MPs under the express direction of the Chief MP authorized by the Lord.

* *Sprenkeln* is an affectionate nickname Shadow Apparitions use to address children and comes from German having meanings such as: dot, sprinkle, mottle, or dapple.

* Just like humans, Apparition body language and gestures can be centralized to a specific body part and have certain meanings. Eyes and the region surrounding the eyes are a focal point of expression for Shadow Apparitions due to adapting their culture to support the Mother Nature myth that states they possess her eyes, the Sun and Moon.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Imayoshi didn’t appreciate being snubbed. “You’re such a hypocrite. And an even bigger manipulator.”

Akashi didn’t flinch.

“As if your moral compass is anymore self-serving and righteous than mine.”

“It talks less.”

Chapter Notes

Uwaaaa. How are you all doing? I’ve been in a thick mire of I don't even know what. (Like that empty-headed, space-out feeling where you just stare absently without any drive to do more. Very strange.)
I've been busy using as much free time this week as I have completing drafts for the next few chapters to be edited for posting! And believe you me, I'm eager to reveal these golden eggs of much-deserved truth. But I can't drop these bombs until they're absolutely perfect. Word play (and usage) is very important, after all.
With all that being said, buckle up and get ready, the storm is coming kiddies!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That attitude is exactly what landed you in this mess,” Akashi said. “Believing yourself so much more intuitive and superior than others.”

Imayoshi was still pacing his breath, sitting on his knees. A hollow ache filled his chest though it was not as poignant as before. So he allowed himself to slump. He realized that he could no longer prove a worthy challenge. Akashi’s orchestrated attacks had served their purpose, battering his middle-aged frame. Consideration for affliction aside, Akashi maneuvered with the energy of a body far younger than one hundred thirty-one.

Athleticism and stamina, qualities he boasted in his youth, had steadily atrophied. First during his station as a legislator, then as an ambassador to his predecessor, and finally beneath the mantle of Dan. Now his negligence had come back around to bite him. He’d grown complacent, confident that his research had been fruitful and for the last century it had been.

What tripe.

Akashi stood, arm across his middle. Discomfort tweaked his face but he carried himself tall.

The Lord had done what he always did. Stalked, pounced, and demobilized his prey. Imayoshi wondered how much longer Akashi would paw before he was satisfied. Surely he must be tired of toying around.
“How are you any different,” Imayoshi asked.

“That is something you would never understand.”

He didn’t appreciate being snubbed.

“You’re such a hypocrite. And an even bigger manipulator.”

Akashi didn’t flinch.

“Clearly we have time to spare. So tell me. What is this mysterious difference that separates us? As if your moral compass is anymore self-serving and righteous than mine.”

“It talks less.” Akashi’s gaze darted away, toward the east arcade. “Judgment time.”

Imayoshi’s brow scrunched. An itch bit at his ankles and he thought it a protest from his nerves to resituate. The tingling expanded erupting into a fiery prickle that blanketed his entire back. Like a swarm of molested bees. His hair stood on end, breaking his skin into gooseflesh, as if to fend off the mob. The sensation intensified, gaining mass and enveloping him. His throat thickened and he craned a look over his shoulder.

Aomine was stepping through the colonnaded walk into the upper quad. Static wires coursed his body, vested in the same clothes he wore in the Water Room yesterday. Neither grime nor sweat stained his appearance. A new bandage had even been reapplied to the wound on his forehead dealt by Nebuya.

Spindly flickers lunged from long fingers as they curled into tight fists.

Aomine stopped ten feet away. The invisible swarm perpetuated their assault on his skin.

Imayoshi fought to contain his surprise. How was this possible? Nebuya had expertly subdued Aomine to eliminate this exact interference from occurring.

*Your combat chief never showed.* Akashi’s words from earlier. First thought to be a cheap distraction designed to compel him into hasty action. But as Aomine towered over him, betrayal casting a grave shadow upon his face, looking better for the wear, it all became clear.

The timely capture of Nebuya’s contingent. The trace evidence of an impromptu evacuation and the suspiciously empty capital town. The intentional—almost vainglorious—exposure of his hidden nature. Herding Susa and Imayoshi apart and targeting only the shadow with electrocution rather than him. The Lord allowing himself to be convincingly injured in a staged battle.

And what was said about Aomine’s suppressed power.

*Though I’m sure it’s elementary to achieve when your victim is a wailing infant.*

It was no arrogant taunt. It was forewarning.

*Underhanded tactics are below me.* Another dropped hint gone unheeded.

Then, just now.

*You’re useless to me dead. Don’t fret, your punishment is coming.*

Akashi knew Aomine would come to Casimir seeking vengeance.
He arranged to have Aomine redirected here. But how could he have achieved such a convoluted manipulation in so short a time? The truth of what transpired that night one hundred years ago, kept strictly between Imayoshi and his accomplice, had been revealed just yesterday. Only Aomine and Nebuya would have received this new information. So how?

He whirled his gaze to Akashi. Looking weary and battered, arm around himself and face twinged with discomfort, the Lord stood proud with an irksome confidence.

“Humility, by the way.” He added a smile. “Since you asked.

* * *

Emotions ricocheted through Aomine. Disgust, outrage, apprehension. All were wrestling for control, fueled by memories invoked at the sight of Imayoshi.

He thought himself prepared for this moment. Finally confronting the puppet master who, for the last century, had strung him along a path of naiveté, emotionally compromised and completely dependent. Anger was surging fast, bulldozing his rational thoughts aside to make way for the imminent flood. The tethers of his self-restraint were uncoiling, more sparks popping from his flesh as if to alleviate the overflow.

The spurts, erupting more and more without provocation, hardly registered to him. However, judging by the astonished look holding his traitorous uncle’s face, their presence was quite vivid to him.

Aomine’s gaze swept the upper quad where debris from an altercation sprinkled the stones. Scattered ice chips, most the size of a die, were thawing into tiny puddles. Air bubbles clouding larger more translucent fragments told Aomine the ice was formed rapidly, allowing oxygen to invade and weaken resistance to damage. Too brittle to inflict a serious wound and hardly enough to receive the brunt of a physical attack. Whatever their purpose had been, it confirmed his long-distanced survey from the other side of the courtyard. The sovereigns had engaged in a conflict just before his arrival, the victor obviously Akashi.

Though by a narrow margin, he’d say.

He did not meet the Lord’s gaze, instead inventorying the battle scars. Few bruises, an impressive one blossoming on his left cheek, blood having budded then dried. Two daggers left untouched, one driven into his thigh and the other protruding from his forearm. No grip or hilt, measuring eight inches with a bulbed tip. He’d seem similar knives strapped to Tetsu’s thigh and tucked into his boots. The weapon’s bland style made maintenance, production, and camouflage against an assassin’s usually dark or loose-fitting garb simple. Then, like quills on an aggressed porcupine, Aomine spotted dozens of icy points jutting from the Lord’s back and along the rear of the right side of his body.

Aomine was impressed though he schooled his features not to show it. For a man afflicted with impaired neuromuscular mobility, Akashi managed to emerge victorious in a battle wherein he was unevenly matched two to one. While no longer present, the knives embedded in the Lord’s flesh betrayed Susa’s involvement. If Aomine had to guess, the beady-eyed prick slithered away to save
his own neck and let his benefactor fall on the sword of their treachery. Aomine never imagined Akashi a capable fighter, believing him more content in the realm of word and thought.

*Like Tetsu,* he thought.

He finally acknowledged the Lord’s pulling stare.

“You look like hell,” he said.

“A lot of that going around.”

Aomine couldn’t tell if that was meant to be a jab at his shoddy appearance or a touch of dry humor. No emotion showed on the Lord’s exhausted face.

“You’re here now.” Akashi stepped back, the arm around his belly sweeping out at Imayoshi, as if showcasing a tantalizing prize. “I’ll give you fifteen minutes.”

Imayoshi sucked his teeth, affronted.

Aomine glared, sensing challenge. “And then?”

Akashi reached and fished a cell phone from the thigh pocket of his uninjured leg. He wiggled the device as he hobbled toward the colonnaded walk. Aomine had seen the like before. A small but reliable gadget pioneered by the Shadow, engineered by the Fire, and supported on the Lighting’s immense communication network. Weighing just a few ounces and compact thanks to a sliding display, it left the outdated and clumsy radios utilized by the Ice’s national intelligence administration in the dust. Thirty-plus years ago when Tetsu had been captured, a prototype of the phone had been lifted from his effects and been destroyed.

“I’ll have to call in.” Akashi hopped, one-handed, to sit on the half wall, pain etching his face as he worked his dagger-pierced leg onto the ledge. “Do what you want with him until then.”

Aomine stepped around Imayoshi. He didn’t spare him a glance nor did he grant the same cowardly berth his uncle had him in the Water Room yesterday. There was no need to fear that which held no power. Smartly, if but for preservation or clairvoyance, Imayoshi did attempt to interfere or interject. Jagged netting crackled along his neck. Rolling his shoulders dispelled the agitated swarm.

“What if I don’t want an audience?”

Akashi lowered his spine to the column. “You have an odd way of showing gratitude.”

He grunted at what went unspoken. *I didn’t have to give you this chance; take it or leave it.*

Magnanimous asshole. No wonder his own brother couldn’t tolerate him.

He resigned and steadied his fraying nerves with a breath that was anything but calming. He was unsure why the Lord’s presence bothered him. Was he afraid Imayoshi’s silver tongue would somehow criminalize him? Or perhaps because he could not predict how harsh his reaction would be in light of Imayoshi’s response? His emotions were riding a fine, fragile line of control and discord, and with his newly established nature not yet tamed, the possibility that he would lose himself again was frightening.

Like on the plateau cliff.
Back then, unlike now, Kagami had been there to pull him back. Given the Lord’s condition and factoring his affliction, he possessed no means to intervene should the same misstep happen again. Aomine needed to be in total command of the situation and stamp out any opportunity Imayoshi may seize to rouse him.

Another breath swallowed and he turned to face his greatest adversary.

Imayoshi was no longer slumping. His back had straightened, shoulders drawn back, assuming the same calculative and diplomatic posture Aomine had witnessed innumerable times before from the staunchness of international conference tables to the domestic comfort of the plush sitting room in the Dan’s personal apartment. Other than displeasure pushing and pulling deep folds around his eyes, the Dan was poised for confrontation.

Aomine wasn’t sure what he should say. His visions of this encounter were always watered down to violence with little to nothing said at all. Words, like feelings, were infantile concepts that he had never learned to properly wield.

No. It was more accurate to say that he was prevented.

Imayoshi’s hard stare digging at his skin forced his mouth to work.

“Do you feel anything at all? Are you even capable of fathoming what you’ve done to me?” He paused, searching his uncle’s face for the slightest twitch. A tell that would suggest Imayoshi registered remorse. Or guilt or shame.

Nothing.

“What about my parents,” he asked. “My mother?”

“I did what I had to.”

Crinkled forks of static speared the stones between him and Imayoshi as he roared, “To validate your own delusions.”

Imayoshi did not jump but he flinched.

“Those half-assed platitudes never worked on me. Stop wasting time.”

Again in the same authoritative monotone, “I answered your questions.”

“You dodged them.”

Imayoshi said nothing, petulance and pride evident on his weary face.

“You’d rather rot in a Zhestokiy jail”—sparks clouded, pulsing angry—“than confess all that you’ve done?”

Silence. Imayoshi’s gaze drifted away.

His temper flared and he fired a coarse bolt the punched Imayoshi’s left shoulder. The traitor cried as his back slapped the flagstones. Hand clamped over the wound, his spine bowed, the burn no doubt excruciating. Aomine quashed an unbidden prick of guilt. This monster didn’t deserve commiseration for suffering.

Ugly lines traced Imayoshi’s face in a grimace. Posturing, just as Aomine thought.
“Quit whimpering. You can either tell me what I want to know or I’ll spend the time we have left transforming my aim on your shameless hide.”

Incredulity leered through scuffed lenses.

“Interrogation is one of my skill sets,” he said. “In case you forgot.”

A weak electric curl stretched his throat, as if to punctuate his point.

From the half wall, Akashi called, “Thirteen minutes.”

Neither he nor the Dan paid the announcement any mind but the message rang clear. Frustration faded from Imayoshi. He hefted himself to sit once again with labored breaths on his knees. He draped his injured arm into his lap, other hand still cupping the wound. Through his fingers, Aomine saw singed fabric.

“I want the truth. No interpretations or half-baked attempts to manipulate the facts.”

He paused. Not for concession, knowing Imayoshi would never ably provide one. Rather he wanted the implicit ramifications that defying him would bring to sink in. He would not tolerate deviations. Not today. Now was his last chance to sort fact from fiction. To unravel the half-truths, utter lies, and factual nuggets of all that he knew and weave a final complete story of what really happened all those years ago.

A grunt was all the Dan offered him. His version of begrudging approval.

And all Aomine was going to get.

“Tell me what happened, one hundred years ago, on the day my parents died.”

Chapter End Notes

Glossary of Terms:
Zhestokiy: the name applied to the Lightning Apparition kingdom apart from the Rus-Ainu

Points of Clarification:
*As stated, Akashi is 131 years old, so if you thought he was still a baby-faced ruler, BZZZT. His appearance is actually closer to a (well-taken care of and healthy) 43 year old.

*Imayoshi refers to himself as "middle-aged." He is 179 years old (appearance of a 60 year old!)

*As Aomine said, the Shadow are the tech masters! They have developed much of the modern technology now in the Rus-Ainu's employ including most electronic machines (phones, radios, televisions, cameras, appliances, etc). The Lightning cornered the communications (see electricity, lol) market. The Fire manufacture the empire's metal alloys into workable products from raw ores. Unfortunately, the Ice aren't as on board with the tech wave as their neighbors...
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

He removed his glasses and thumbed the lenses with his sleeve. “Was Daiki worth it, Nori?”

No hesitation. “Yes, he was.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a doozy to edit and type, whoo! But finally, the moment has come for Imayoshi to reveal what he's done. It's been a long time coming, hasn't it? I butchered this baby while revising it until I couldn't take away anything else without leaving something out. So while I apologize for the length, I'm relieved to finally present this climactic moment to you all! : )

As always I appreciate the support you've all given me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Casimir

October 2, 1906

Imayoshi crouched beside Susa. They were hunkered down in a teeming batch of shrubs. A farmhouse rose fifty or so feet away. Like many other pastoral homes in the outer reaches of the capital, the building was a single storied estate that fronted barns, warehouses, parlors, stables, sheds, and paddocks. Government-funded plats like this one supported the kingdom’s agriculture, employing families that had, for generations, mastered the southern soil to produce cereals, mill lumber, manage livestock, and foster families. In his youth, Daichi had spent time on such a farm along the Yenisei River that threaded a lazy zigzag on its journey to join the frigid waters of the Arctic. Consumable farms—rearing animals for consumption—plotted the eastern bank, raising boar, sheep, goats, and deer.

From earlier sleuthing, Imayoshi had learned the Kaizer’s unusual upbringing came at the behest of his father, the then-Kaizer Aomine Daisuke. Further digging did not yield a definitive reason. Until a promising glimmer provided insight that only served to compound his concerns. After uncovering an affair with an Ice woman, Daisuke’s wife Sofia—who possessed several neuroses that went unmentioned before their marriage—had threatened to kill herself and their unborn child on multiple occasions. Instead of obeying her wishes, Daisuke suspended relations long enough to placate Sofia through her pregnancy. Three years into newborn Daichi’s life, her paranoia intensified and her behavior became radical and unpredictable. Devotion to her child was supplanted by her intense obsession to acquire Daisuke’s uninterrupted attention. Fearing for his
son’s wellbeing and certain her neglect would do more harm to the child, Daisuke flexed his authority, overriding his father’s ordainment of their marriage and had her committed to an institution.

Thereafter Daisuke resumed cavorting with his mistress. Daichi was entrusted to a cadre of caretakers to see to his upbringing. Whether it was to erase all vestiges of his clinically-damaged ex-wife or to imbue his heir with memories of humble, loving origins, Imayoshi was not sure.

When Imayoshi confronted Nori about her connection to the fledgling Kaizer little over two months ago, he’d firmly asserted that terminating the hybrid spawn would purge her sins. To strengthen his play, he had even shared with her the nefarious atrocities brought upon the Fire and Ice by the Aomine family. Hopeful that he had been speaking to her heightened stance on social justice and racial equality. After all, her lover was heir to a heinous, barbaric clan of tyrant supremacists who had, for generations, disregarded international, cultural, and civic conventions outlawing crimes of torture, unjust imprisonment and kidnapping, entrapment, trafficking, battery, murder, and sexual assault. Daichi was married at the time, the union a scary near-parallel of his father’s failed relationship. One slight veer off the tracks would send everything spiraling into the same devastating tailspin.

It appeared as though she had comprehended her mistake. She cooperated as they arranged to meet a physician the following morning to assess her situation and discuss the successful probability of abortion. Extracting an unborn child nearing the end of an arduous nine month gestation carried great risk. No guesswork was needed for him to determine the little monster’s breed. Nori would have been half the size she was then if she was fostering one of her own in her womb, a full twelve months necessary for the young one’s intrauterine development.

Another of Daichi’s cursed brood was about to enter the world. Following the same predetermined footpath as every Aomine that had come before.

He truly believed she’d understood.

But when he’d delivered her supper that same night, she was gone. And with her, his sympathy for tolerating her foolish idealism.

She made her choice and he, his.

So began a century-long surreptitious pact with Susa Yoshinori. Their first meeting had been six years ago, in spring of 1900, at an international summit. As newly-appointed chief security advisor of the Rus-Ainu it took no time at all for Susa to accurately size him up across the conference table. Made easy by Imayoshi’s persistent heated glare nailed to Daichi, ignoring even Akashi Seiichi. The Lord had proposed the gathering in an effort to once and for all evict the Ice from China and drive them to inhabit colonies sprouting rampant across arctic North America. Imayoshi countered with abrasive resistance. The flourishing expansion of the western settlements had piqued the Fire and Lightning’s ridiculous alpha dog sense of possession and dominance. Seiichi had started the trend by establishing the state of Yamato on the Florida peninsula. Which encouraged—or persuaded, Imayoshi always believed—Czar Nakatani to set up shop in southern Georgia and Daichi in the Appalachian Mountains. The ploy had not deceived Imayoshi. He realized quickly the strategic placements and geographical exploits to be gained because he’d seen it before. Different part of the world but a clear reflection of the goings-on in China. The same tired old passive aggression that slowly cinched away access to resources and congealed the population into decrepit, war-shambled ruins. Everyday erasing boundary lines to draw new ones, further tightening the noose until there was no choice but to either surrender or fade away to disease and famine. If it was happening now in China, it would happen again in North America.
Six months and several flaccid negotiation attempts later, Susa appeared at Goryokaku possessing far too much confidential information about Imayoshi than he deemed acceptable. The shadow was cruising on the belief that he wished harm to befall Daichi for reasons other than geographical conquest. Such as a clandestine relationship between his sister and the Kaizer that, contrary to a court order dissolving the couple’s illegal marriage in 1893, was still ongoing.

Imayoshi had thought the visit a warning but Susa harbored intense hatred for his Lightning masters. A fact that came to light with repeated unannounced visits over the next few years. The association was, at first, loose. More like an observer examining an interesting subject from afar. Imayoshi had precious little to offer the Rus-Ainu’s lapdog in the way of conversation or hospitality. Susa never seemed slighted. In fact, the shadow reacted benevolently to Imayoshi’s probing. For a man whose nationality was penciled in, he admired that Susa’s absolute loyalty was reserved solely to his breed, not his masters.

Which, it turned out, mattered nothing to Nori.

Just days after she fled, in June of 1906, he contacted Susa, The shadow quickly confirmed her location to be somewhere within Casimir. Another week of patrol in the Lightning capital uncovered that, while her whereabouts were being shielded, she had been spotted wandering the marketplace with an escort. A description was not provided by witnesses but it wasn’t a far reach to assume it was one of Daichi’s officers.

The week after, Daichi’s second attempt to annul his marriage succeeded—Daisuke had blocked his earlier proposition in 1883 when the mantle of Kaizer passed from father to son—though in a way no one expected. Palace staffers that had been arranging the wife’s eviction to a city apartment were driven from the chamber when final parting words between once-ago spouses escalated into a one-sided altercation wherein the divorcée smashed a wall-mounted mirror over the Kaizer’s head. As she was wrested from the room, she was quoted by onlookers as screaming about an “ice whore.” Gossip of the incident flooded the capital, migrating east through the otherwise tight lips of diplomats and ambassadors where it had soon reached Imayoshi’s ears in Jia.

The epithet proved without reasonable doubt that Daichi was harboring Nori until she was ready to give birth. Ice Apparitions appealed that Imayoshi demand extradition to properly prosecute the deserter. Fortunately for him, the Lightning’s rampant imagination generated a particular brand of internal distrust that should have, but did not, rile citizens into complete upheaval. The sheer volume of civilians accosting Daichi about the sordid affair excited petitions to investigate, impeach, and, more radically, publically execute the Kaizer for displaying such a scandalous affront to the empire. Whether fueled by arrogance or ignorance, the young Kaizer did not cow to the pressure. Instead he fielded every inquiry. Defended every accusation. Killed every rumor. Smoothed every threat presented by naysayers. Detectives from the empire’s exclaves and neighboring nations—including Jia—were authorized to search points of interest, question witnesses, and sift through official documentation for evidence to support the ex-wife’s allegations. Military police of Zhestokiy, Fumetsu, and Selene united and thoroughly combed the palace concluding their investigations with testimonies provided by both Daichi and Daisuke.

At the close of August 1906, all three agencies convened to declare the witch-hunt over. The bastardization of a good man’s character by a woman slighted. Casimir accepted the acquittal with facetious ease.

However the dismissal did not detract Imayoshi’s attention. Or Susa’s. Into the first week of September, Daichi absconded from the palace, leaving strict instructions with his second-in-command Hyuuga Junpei that he not be contacted. The public gullibly bought the vacation as a
retreat to recover from the botched character assassination. But Imayoshi knew better.

The child had been born.

Daichi resumed leadership six days later and Susa intensified his surveillance on the Kaizer. He’d eventually tailed him to a farmhouse along the Yenisei. Possession of the fifteen acre plat had been transferred to Daichi by one of his caretakers as a coronation present. Vigils led Susa to believe he’d secured the couple’s nest.

Between token appearances and monitoring the Kaizer’s movements much of the September month was spent hashing their scheme. The endgame now clear. And Imayoshi surprised himself at how unrepulsed he felt with what he planned to do.

So, on the second day of October, they made their move.

“Lights are still burning,” he said.

Susa lifted a pocket watch into the hazy moonshine and checked the dial. “They’re probably putting the kid down. Unlike us, parents’ lives aren’t scheduled.”

He ignored the quip and studied the house. An older specimen, probably early 1800s. Thatch roof, log siding, casement windows, brick chimney stacks. A dormer window leered from atop the wood-paneled door like mindful guardian. Wrought-iron lanterns bracketing the entryway radiated a dim orange glow that attracted no insects. Too cold. Sunset marked a rapid cool down, the temperature pitching more than fifteen degrees over the last three hours. Before the operation, Susa had provided him with subtle Shadow field wear. Tactical cargo pants, a blouson jacket, boots, and leather gloves. With no humidity, Imayoshi was comfortable.

“What do you know about the layout,” he asked, not taking his eyes off the residence.

Apart from the door, the façade was unbroken. Making it impossible to imagine the interior.

“Two bedrooms on the right,” Susa said. “Kitchen in the front left and behind it in the rear is the den.”

“The nursery?”

Susa pointed to the closest bedroom.

“Points of ingress?”

“The kitchen window would be ideal at this hour. Even if lights are burning, there’s no guarantee anyone is occupying any given room.”

Their position, catty-corner to the front door, gave them an angled view of three pedimented windows on the house’s left side. Firelight pulsed in all but the foremost room.

He chewed his cheek and rolled possibilities through his mind. He believed in the assassin’s ability to perform. Susa’s accuracy, dedication, and thoroughness had countless times impressed him. Playing every angle against his adversaries with clairvoyance and attention to detail. For six years he managed to maintain his cover as Imayoshi’s spy, his handlers none the wiser. He’d successfully discovered this place, reconnoitered the area, and obtained blueprints of the layout. He somehow even acquired down-to-the-minute knowledge of Nori and Daichi’s routine from a
Before Imayoshi could stop himself, he asked, “The kitchen?”

Susa either did not register his skepticism or ignored it. “Shuts down by 8:30.”

He dragged a long chilly breath. He dismissed his reservations and gave Susa the nod. The assassin hopped from the shrubs and moved toward the house. Imayoshi followed his lead. They crept close to the firs, larches, and spruces that blanketed this region. As the windows came into view, they crouched in the patchy shadows and examined the panes. No movement within and now only one room strobed with firelight. The den in the rear of the house.

Susa’s observations seemed correct. Which reminded him.

“How did you go about scouting this place?”

“Teleporting.”

Of course. “And we aren’t, because?”

Eyes glued to the windows, Susa said, “The aforementioned uncertainty of our target’s position inside, for starters.”

Imayoshi snuffed.

“Relax. The place is old and remote. No locks on the doors or windows.”

No posted security either, he noticed. Daichi wouldn’t risk exposing his treachery by involving even his most trusted officers. Not with how quickly his countrymen turned on him just weeks earlier.

Susa was too confident for his liking.

“Neighbors?”

“A few,” Susa said. “None close enough to be of concern.”

He sighed hard and pulled free the knife strapped to his belt. Staring at the sharpened gleaming edge reaffirmed his worries. What he was about to do. Susa did not interrupt him, keeping his attention trained on the house. Another breath and he sheathed the weapon.

“Take point,” he said.

Susa sprung from cover and skimmed the shaggy turf to the darkened kitchen window. He lowered himself under the sill, waited, then nudged a look inside. Eyes still searching, he beckoned Imayoshi over.

While he closed the distance, Susa inched the pane open slowly, muting the squeak of wood friction. His accomplice slipped through first with the liquid ease of a cat negotiating a crevice. Imayoshi followed.

While he closed the distance, Susa inched the pane open slowly, muting the squeak of wood friction. His accomplice slipped through first with the liquid ease of a cat negotiating a crevice. Imayoshi followed.

Rustic oak countertops ringed the room, accommodating a wash basin, an ice box, and a bulky stove. Musty herbs dangling from an iron grille suspended over an island counter stung his nose. He also detected another smell lurking deeper in the house. Fragrant, like beeswax.

Susa skated around the island to a yawning archway and the only portal letting in or out. Imayoshi
kept pace. Susa flattened to the wall and peeked beyond the threshold into a hallway as wide as he was tall. Firelight flickered in the rearmost room, refracting throughout the hall. Then he looked at a door standing across the way. Closed. Whispers eased through.

Susa started for the door.

Imayoshi grabbed his shoulder. The shadow’s body was rigid but he turned without resistance.

“Having second thoughts?”

Imayoshi’s reaction had surprised himself but he ignored Susa’s accusatory tone and said, “Of course not.”

Susa said nothing though the fold of his brow demanded an explanation.

“I need to confirm something.”

Susa did not budge, face still skeptical.

Perhaps a dose of practicality would work. “If you go barging in there, Daichi will be hackles up before you can make the first strike. Nori is no slouch, either. Allow me to enter first. My intrusion will disarm them and draw them into a state of confusion that we can both capitalize on.”

Susa hesitated, seeming to chew on the idea. Mouth bowed with what Imayoshi knew was begrudging approval, he jerked his head to the door. Imayoshi crossed the floorboards and hovered his hand over the knob. Susa slinked to the wall, pressing his back firm against the panels. His perch until Imayoshi gave the signal. Or, he entertained, until the assassin grew tired of waiting.

He twisted the knob and threw the door open.

Susa’s intel was dead-on. The nursery unfolded a cramped 20 feet square. A cast iron lantern suspended from a hook in the ceiling washed the walls in a pleasant amber glow. Nestled in the far corner, a stout wood stove dispensed warmth. Nori sat upon the arm of a cushioned rocking chair beside an empty crib. Occupying the seat was Daichi.

And in his arms a tiny bundle swaddled in a fleece blanket.

Shock invaded their faces. Which for Nori quickly evolved into contained rage.

She leapt from her perch, her once waist-long hair curling delicately under her ears. The only tradition of home she seemed adherent to obey, it seemed. From the confirmation of pregnancy until childbirth, expecting mothers grew their hair long. For millennia, Ice women drew predictions of fetal development and judged their worth as prospective caretakers by how diligently and meticulously they cared for their hair. Then, after the child was born, the tresses were docked usually to the nape and burned with a concoction of salt, alcohol, and herbal oils as a blessing to the newborn.

She marched up to him as he entered, easing the door to a mere crack. Enough for Susa to hear all.

Daichi rose and gently laid the bundle in the crib.

“Shouichi, get out,” Nori said.

Daichi stood guard, electric coils billowing in warning. Typical exaggeration of Lightning male
“What do you want, Imayoshi,” the Kaizer growled.

Imayoshi’s gaze darted to the crib, through twig-thing bars, to the child.

“It’s one thing to drag her away from her own customs but then to go and ignore your own?” He met Daichi’s glare. “Whatever happened to the no daddy in the picture for two weeks, lest we disturb the newborn rule? That anxious to start farming out her womb for more of your hell spawn?”

Lightning popped and Daichi snarled at the sarcasm. Though not without reason. Only selfish, abusive, and emotionally-unbalanced Lightning males disregarded their role in the first two weeks of fatherhood. Once conception occurs, pheromones and other chemical signals released by the mother let loose a flood of testosterone in the father that flows unmediated through to childbirth. Moments after the child is freed from the birth canal, the mother, with her depleted energy, is able to effortlessly synchronize wavelengths with the newborn. Strengthening their bond and allowing for proper post-partum developments to ensue. Weighing a measly four pounds on average, the presence of a hormonally-supercharged father radiating immense electromagnetic energy threatened to destabilize or damage the newborn’s fragile nervous system. Forbidding the father’s involvement for at least the first two weeks while the mother’s energy recovered and the child’s own electromagnetism bolstered up had succeeded in receiving federal backing with severe judicial penalties. The lives of several thousand women and children had been saved as a result.

But, of course, law did not apply to the Kaizer.

Nori stepped between them, her eyes hot. “Two months I haven’t seen you and that’s the first thing out of your mouth?”

He pulled his attention downward, she a whole head shorter. “Am I wrong?”

“What you are is not welcome here,” she said.

He fought to contain his rising emotions. “I warned you not to do this, sister. You had a chance to make this right after your naiveté landed you in jail. Or have you conveniently forgotten about father defending you in Casimir’s courthouse?”

“If anyone is to blame for the repercussions of my marrying Daichi”—she pointed to her lover—“it’s his father. Daisuke insisted Daichi have me and I accepted. Contrary to your narrow perception of the world, I adore him.” She paused. “Daisuke failed to properly exercise his authority over the people of Zhestokiy. They launched the trial against me, rather than him or Daichi. And father then, just like you now, had to gallantly flock to rescue me from myself. Another woman piloted by her small intelligence and boundless emotions.”

A twinge of hurt shot through Imayoshi at her callous tone though her posture revealed nothing.

“You are a fool,” she continued, “if you think that my relationship with a Lightning man has changed who I am. I have always clashed with our traditional values. Our conservative approach to novelty and innovation. I have always fought to equalize. A fact you know well because it is that exact attitude that led me to meet Daichi in the first place. But you’re willing—eager, I’d say—to overwrite everything you knew about me and whittle my character down to a hapless woman who allows herself to be dominated by a Lightning man.”

His tone escalated, unbidden, as he retorted, “You’re bringing race into this?”
“Tell me it’s not a factor.”

“You know what this is about, Nori. Have you forgotten everything that I told you about him and his family?”

She stood headstrong. “Almost as fast as the door closed behind you that night.”

Imayoshi stomped a step forward, throwing his hands down. Frost slicked his skin gone unseen but for his face and neck. “How do you think this is going to end? He can’t even respect his own laws in regards to his children,” he said, gesturing to the crib.

“My ignorance to law is the only reason this child is alive,” Daichi interjected.

Imayoshi cut him a critical look. “You expect me to believe that you synchronized with the child?”

The Kaizer did not speak.

Imayoshi disregarded him.

“Do you honestly believe you have a future with this man,” he asked Nori. “That you can somehow live a normal, public life? You were his affair. His dirty little secret. The empire reviles you. These people,”—he jabbed a finger at Daichi, eyes trained on her —”despise us. They will never accept you as anything but an exotic brood sow the same as all the others.”

True to form, Nori took the lashing with composure. Her staunch control of emotion had always amazed him in their youth, even in the face of adversity and inequality. Now it filled him with ugly jealousy. How could she be so calm about this?

She did not hesitate to say, “Their perception of me is irrelevant. As I recall, they also hated his first wife and she was of the Lightning.” She paused as though waiting for her words to stir up a reaction.

Imayoshi stubbornly pursed his lips.

“All I need are Daichi and Daiki,” she continued. “No one else.”

His churning anger hiccupped. Daiki?

“Our son,” Daichi said. “Aomine Daiki.”

Had he spoken his thought aloud?

The Kaizer stalked from the crib. Nori backstepped, as though on autopilot, rotating the guard. Imayoshi drew his shoulders back as the Kaizer squared up to face him. Six imposing inches separated their crowns.

“That’s the only concession you’re giving her?” Like the Shadow and Fire, the Ice formally addressed one another by surname, then given name.

Daichi did not latch onto the challenge. “You forfeited the right to criticize our judgments the day you told her to abort Daiki. You’re an enemy to this family who cares more about the integrity and honor of a name than the life of the one who carries it.”

“Like how your family was so considerate of the wellbeing of every Apparition they captured, exploited, and threw away, repeating the same grotesque scheme on the children of their victims?”
More lightning fizzled yet Daichi retained control. “I am not responsible for the crimes my forefathers committed.”

“You’re just a product of it. Don’t be so arrogant, Daichi. I read the family history. I know all about the genetic mining that takes place even today with what few of you Aomines remain.”

Daishi hissed, amber eyes alight “I am not responsible for their crimes.”

Imayoshi refused to let him off easy. “Aren’t you though? While it may be the blackest sheep of your family directly involved, their operation of swiping up my people within fifty miles of your border is still vigorously ongoing. Yet you’ve done nothing to prosecute them for sex trafficking.”

His voice dropped to a whisper. “I know it’s them. Your degraded, genetically-undesirable, and removed aunts, uncles, and cousins. And what’s more, you know it, too.”

From the crib, Nori said, “Enough, Shouichi.”

The interruption pierced him like a hot poker. Her posture and voice betrayed no disappointment or exasperation. Conviction was written clear in the faraway look in her eyes. And like a cork pulled from a drain, all the anger and resentment he had been containing flushed away. His hands, numb with tension, slackened. His shoulders sagged.

This encounter was not a total crapshoot. He’d meant what he said before to Susa. About needing to confirm something.

Now was the deciding moment.

He removed his glasses and thumbed the lenses with his sleeve.

“Was this worth it, Nori?” He did not meet her gaze as he asked. “Betraying your county. Your family. Your compatriots and everything they stood for?” He motioned to the crib. “Was Daiki worth it?”

No hesitation. “Yes, he was.”

Imayoshi pushed the frames onto his nose.

And looked up into her eyes. Dark, like cobalt. “I’m sorry I wasn’t.”

He turned to the door and fingered open the crack. Susa was still pressed to the wall, senses on alert, having overheard everything. Brief eye contact transmitted the order. Imayoshi, out of swing range, pushed the door open wide.

Susa rushed in, cutting tight around the door frame, and sunk a punch into the Kaizer’s chest. Air heaved from Daichi as he hinged forward. With the same hand Susa clamped his throat and shoved the Kaizer into the wall.

Nori lurched to Daichi’s aid.

Imayoshi snagged her away, compressing her in his hold, and drug her back toward the crib where Daiki slept unaware. She wrestled and he retaliated by locking her head, face pressed into his chest.

Susa barred Daichi against the wall, hand over his mouth. Thorny vines of lightning whipped at the assassin, stinging the man’s face and arms. Hazy black straps cast from their shadows wound Daichi’s legs, weakening his defiance. Susa produced a knife, similar to the one Imayoshi
possessed, and jammed the tip into Daichi.

The lashing current froze, spasmed, then evaporated.

Angled, off-center, and through the fourth and fifth rib. Into the heart. Not an immediately fatal impact but the most crucial. Susa yanked the blade out, adjusted his grip, and struck down again. Then another and another. One slick, flesh-tearing attack after another sent Nori thrashing again. Imayoshi squeezed hard to contain her as he tallied Susa’s strokes.

Eleven. All erratic and centralized to the chest. Daichi’s mouth was still covered to silence any fading protests. It would take only moments. Every second of which would be excruciating for the young upstart.

He watched in morbid fascination as the fire vanished from Aomine Daichi’s eyes. His hold on Nori loosened.

She wiggled, pushing against his chest. Using her elbow for leverage, she hinged back and planted a fist into his stomach. Biting pain wrangled his attention back. His tightened his arms. She swung once more, then twice, pummeling the same spot. A deep, pinching ache twisted his gut and the fifth blow broke his restraint. She shoved him away and whirled, sights set on Susa.

Imayoshi recovered, ignoring the crippling burn of injury, and lassoed her into his arms again before she could charge. Back pressed to his front, arms pinned to her sides and Nori refused to be subjugated. She clawed, tearing his sleeves, and scraped his flesh with the same piercing impact as before, pounding her feet into his legs. Enduring the brunt, he craned a peek down. Serrated icy talons capped her fingertips and long jagged teeth coated her knuckles. Watery blood slathered the sleek points.

His blood. The pain in his stomach magnified.

He couldn’t believe it. Had she tried to eviscerate him?

“Imayoshi,” Susa shouted.

He snapped from his haze and looked across the room. Daichi was no longer constricted. The Kaizer’s body lay in a crumple on the floor just out of way of the door’s path. Susa knelt beside him, having assisted the corpse’s collapse. Irritation blazed within the man’s marble-like eyes.

Nori’s rebellion stalled as she spotted Daichi’s body.

The assassin jumped to his feet and Imayoshi realized what was about to happen.

Susa’s boots thumped the hardwood.

Nori had not budged, her body tense. Though not from fear, as he felt no quivering. He sensed something else.

Anticipation.

A shaky breath rattled through him as he understood.

She had accepted her fate.

Hadn’t he?

Crushing her tight against him, he ripped the knife free, held his breath, and drove the tip into her
chest. He expected her scream or cry. To curse him for betraying her. Only a gasp.

Susa halted a few feet away, cold eyes drilling into him.

“Again. Like I did him.”

Delivered with the authoritative crack of a whip, the words demanded him to comply. Imayoshi shut his eyes. Pressure swelled within him, fed by the inflammation scorching his stomach. He eased the weapon out, swallowed, and obeyed. Two strikes became five then eight then twelve. All surrounding her heart, as Susa had instructed him. Moments passed before the rigidity in her body dissolved, weight dropping into her knees. He clumsily cradled her as he lowered her spine-first to the floor. Blood soiling the glove of his right hand complicated the situation, not wanting to transmit unnecessary evidence. But careful maneuvering extracted him from Nori. He stood, eyes transfixed on her face. The grotesque contortion of death that carved the agony, terror, and pain felt in those final moments was absent. Her brow pinched into a weak, barely-there wrinkle.

And she blinked. Tears crawled toward her ears and she tilted her gaze away. To the other side of the room.

At Daichi.

Susa’s voice broke his daze. “Thought you lost your nerve.”

Imayoshi bit his cheek at the challenge, abating the rise to insult. Or observe his sister’s final moments.

“I’ve killed before,” he said.

“I’ve read the reports. The campaign in the 1860s in Bokoku. Back when you were a know-nothing foot soldier.”

“Then don’t doubt me.”

“Did you whimper like that before you killed those Fire Apparitions, too?”

Imayoshi snarled, leather squeaking as his fists curled tight. The air pitched, a chill expanding outward, engulfing the nursery. Susa’s eyes traced the room, his breath coming in misty puffs. No such reaction would betray Imayoshi. Just as the temperature took a dramatic nosedive, his own body heat stooped to match it. Sparkling frost bloomed on the walls, unfurling to the floor and creeping to seek the natural cool eeking in from the window panes.

“Make no mistake. I loved my sister. When she revealed herself to be an enemy I did what I had to do.” He paused, resisting the tug to lower his gaze. “That didn’t mean I had to enjoy it.”

Susa did not speak. Or surrender his challenge. But something about the shadow’s posture persuaded Imayoshi there was no interest in antagonizing him further. For now, at least.

He relaxed his muscles, shaking the tension from his fingers. It took a few deep-chested breaths to thaw the room and reset the atmosphere. Little evidence existed to suggest a change had occurred, save for condensation streaking the glass. He could only reabsorb so much moisture without unbalancing his own equilibrium.

He turned to the crib. Daiki continued to sleep unbothered.

Pitiful little creature.
Against his better judgment, he approached and leaned over the rail. Tucked into the folds of the fleece blanket a tiny dusky face peeked through. The bloodied glove warned that fingering away the covering for a better look was a bad idea. Though he was tempted.

Floorboards creaked as Susa came close, edging a glance over Imayoshi’s shoulder.

“Well?”

Imayoshi’s attention stayed on Daiki. “Well what?”

“Would you rather I do it?”

When they’d constructed this affair, the body count included the child. At the time he had elected himself to exterminate the hybrid monster. A task he had fully intended to complete. Until he invited an alternative angle. An idea he’d allowed to tumble around his mind privately in the days leading up to the incursion. The same thought now enticing him to reconsider his position. That this hell spawn was actually more valuable than he’d first convinced himself to believe.

His silence aggravated Susa, who grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

Before he could speak, Imayoshi cut in. “He lives.”

He expected protest. Instead confusion tweaked Susa’s face.

“Want to explain why you’re creating a liability?”

“But at a crime scene.” Thinking a flex of authority would work, he added, “This is my call.”

A shadow of defiance gleamed in the assassin’s eyes as he seemed to consider. Imayoshi realized it was unwise to switch tack so arbitrarily while adrenaline from the kill was still running high. And Susa was still armed, the soiled knife grasped in a reverse hold. Seconds passed, coiling tension ever higher. Imayoshi despised this facet of his associate’s personality since their first meeting. The man’s face was a mosaic of clashing interpretations. He could never tell what he was thinking. An aggravating trait endemic to all Shadow Apparitions, he surmised. Imayoshi’s gut twisted with anticipation, the throb of assault quelled if but for a short while.

Would the assassin betray him and complete the original objective? He surely could. Susa had no dog in this fight. He was merely a tool, possessing skills Imayoshi lacked. Which the man knew when they’d made this pact. Their cooperation was purely symbiotic. Combine their efforts and resources, do the deed, then walk away.

Susa groaned, head dropping back with a testy sigh.

“If I do this, you’re not dragging me down with you when this jerry-built scheme comes crashing down on you.” He paused, leveling a vacant but foreboding stare. “I will end you, Imayoshi.”

And he believed it.

Not that he would show it. “Save your doubts until we talk. The prospects will benefit us both more than this unnecessary act of violence. Proceed with the mission.”

Susa bobbed his head then asked, “Did you verify her location?”

“I checked her itinerary this afternoon. She’ll be there. Just be quick.”

Susa faced Nori and crouched, adjusting his weapon and, with calculated slowness, reinserted the
blade into the last wound dealt by Imayoshi's knife. He grimaced at the squelch of dead, bloodied
skin again pierced. The assassin stepped over her, crossing the room by tiptoeing around enlarging
pools of the wayward couple's blood. He stopped at the door, still open wide, and grabbed his
stare.

“Hang tight. Before you know it, this will all just be a memory.”

Susa stalked out, toward the darkened kitchen.

“No,” Imayoshi muttered, looking into the crib, at the unaware face sleeping within. “It will be a
living nightmare.”

Imayoshi exhaled a long, slow breath through his nose. He had kept his gaze level with Aomine’s
as he spoke.

He meant what he’d said to Susa all those years ago. The memory of what transpired that night
never abandoned him. It slept in his sheets seeking protection from ghosts. Toddled after him as he
worked, demanding constant attention, correction, and affection. For one hundred years he had
nursed the parasite of his past indiscretions through the tumults of achieving independence and
adulthood all while stymieing the satisfaction of ever completely self-actualizing.

The nightmare never rested, living on in the form of his greatest nemesis.

Possessing his father’s nature, quick-wittedness, and inquisitive skepticism. Donning his mother’s
impeccable beauty, rebellious spirit, and admirable rectitude.

Aomine Daiki, an impossible contradiction.

Aomine had said nothing as he revealed all and was still silent, eyes drilling for every last drop of
precious information.

“Susa returned with Daichi’s ex-wife not long after,” he said. “He’d abducted her from her
apartment in the capital. Once here, he flayed her wrist and arranged the scene to implicate her as a
vengeful divorcee that murdered her ex-husband and new wife when she stumbled upon the truth of
his infidelity. Then, overcome by what she had done, she took her own life rather than face judicial
punishment.”

Chapter End Notes

Points of Clarification
*Imayoshi using the word Jia: From an earlier visual I provided of the geography for
this story, the nation of Ice located in China goes by TWO names. The Rus-Ainu (Fire
and Lightning) use the Japanese word Nise, meaning False. The Ice refer to the nation
using the Chinese word Jia, meaning the same.

Notes
*In a previous chapter, Kagami stated that Fire Apparitions are immune to self-self harm (using their fire to hurt one another) because the energy is reabsorbed. This holds true for Lightning Apparitions as well (for instance Aomine cannot electrocute Akashi because they are both Lightning-inclined). However as illustrated in this chapter, this immunity does not apply to Ice Apparitions, indicative of the way Nori used her power to assault Imayoshi.

*(Just for fun) Aomine Daichi is a full-blooded Lightning Apparition, standing 6'5" with a dusky complexion, amber eyes, and dark hair. His name is written 大知, meaning *supreme wisdom; sage. Imayoshi Nori is a full-blooded Ice Apparition, standing at 5'6" with a medium complexion, cobalt blue eyes, and black hair. Her name is written 儀, meaning *ceremony, rites.*
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Which provoked Aomine to ask, “Why did you keep the name my parents gave me?”

No hesitation.

“Because you are not one of us. You never were.”

Chapter Notes

I’m out there grindin’! Not really, other than the adult life grind, lol
This one took me a while to edit. Not because of content or length, but because I was working on a separate but related project to TWCH. So look forward to that :)
I have all remaining chapters of this story queued up for first draft revision and I plan to have them all published within the next month or two. I’m so excited (and sad) for it’s end and I hope that you all enjoy it, if even a little.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As Aomine listened to the wretched tragedy, two emotions warred within him. Revulsion and intrigue.

His muscles were wound tight with a painful tension. Many times he itched to lunge and land a knuckle-numbing crack into the traitorous bastard’s face as he disclosed his crime. No discernible emotion appeared at all as the gritty details came unfiltered from his uncle’s mouth. Sounds, thoughts, feelings, dialogue. All shared without the man’s characteristic couching and tailoring.

Aomine had warned Imayoshi not to manipulate the facts.

But he wasn’t expecting this.

It was as if Imayoshi had lifted the events from a storybook.

And not once had those narrow, conniving eyes fallen away. Instead they proudly declared his actions justified.

Like they were now.

“Once she was dead,” Imayoshi was saying, “we absconded with you.”

Aomine sneered. “Worried the smell of my parent’s rotting bodies would upset my delicate sensibilities?”

Imayoshi did not react to his acidic tone.

“Daichi’s personal guard would not have investigated his disappearance soon enough that you
would have either starved or fallen ill to the airborne bacteria spewed from your decomposing parents. I had no choice but to take you.”

“And what convenient lie did you pass off to explain how you inexplicably acquired an infant overnight? You’ve been alone all your life. No one would believe you’d maintained an intimate relationship with a woman long enough that she would mother your child. Let alone that you possessed the compassion to raise one.”

Still no reaction. Which disappointed him. He wanted this monster to hurt.

“Our people disappear by the hundreds everyday in the border towns contiguous with Bokoku and Pervobytnyy Les,” Imayoshi said. “Skirmishes, usually. Trafficking and poaching are commonplace today. And almost impossible to regulate. Your mother frequented these towns up until the last year of her life, together with other priestesses whom she retained some good favor with, and dispensed medical and spiritual healing.”

That much Imayoshi had told him before. Her radical principles and brash opinions may have clashed with the Ice’s staunch dogma of traditional medicine but her heart lie with helping the sick, injured, and destitute.

“The temple was led to believe that while on a mission to such a town, she was swept up in a sow cull—collecting women for breeding. Her captor violated her, a fate many sows—and bulls, male breeding subjects—endure weeks before they are paraded for selection before promising buyers and the sponsors and benefactors who finance the culls. Nearly fifteen years divorced from her, Kaizer Aomine Daichi happened upon her group and she was reclaimed once again. The fit thrown by his neurotic ex-wife alerted me to her dreadful condition and I tried in vain to contain her in the temple where she would be safe. Instead, the terror of carrying a Lightning child compelled her to defy me and she escaped, birthing you in secrecy. After an exhausting search, she was found, though too late to matter because a homicidal woman had taken her delusions of abandonment too far. So, I took you away from the hovel where you were born, ensuring that no one would ever know you were the son of Aomine Daichi.”

Something about his expression must have encouraged the Dan to add, “The corpse found in the farmhouse by investigators was not your mother. Her body was moved to a ravaged border town beset by fire, laid among the other deceased. Enough remained upon her discovery for morticians to identify her. Just another casualty of the ongoing war between us and our neighbors.”

Aomine’s skin burned with an itch that consumed his every inch. Electric fury scraping and clawing to escape and fry this man into a charred husk. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

To all the world, he was just another child of systematic ethnic cleansing. His genome so polluted that a convenient birth defect disabled his power and denied him the opportunity to conform to normal life.

And his parents, whom he would never meet, their existences mystified and altered to misdirect him from ever searching for their ghosts. For a semblance of paternal attachment. If even just confirmation that they had lived at all.

Which provoked him to ask, “Why did you keep the name my parents gave me? I was named for my father. His name appears in historical texts, political treatises. Apparitions alive today would have personally known him.” His tone steadily escalated and he threw an arm out. “Hell, his portrait probably hangs in this very palace. Yet you left my name as it was when I was born. Why?”
No hesitation. “Because you are not one of us. You never were.”

Aomine wasn’t sure if the exclusion applied to Ice Apparitions or the Imayoshi family. Or, he suspected, both.

“Look it up in any history book going back to the Lightning during the 17th century and you’ll understand,” the Dan said. “What began as a small family of two exploded into an ugly, polluted clan of marauders, rapaciously pillaging the bodies of Fire and Ice Apparitions in search of the most desirable and potent genes. Darkening their skin, hair and eyes to reduce harmful UV absorption. Thickening their fat reserves to outlast the cold. Increasing their bone density and muscle mass. Reprogramming metabolism to accommodate voracious appetites. Progress was slow at first, taking multiple generations for genotypes to follow the footpath of phenotypes, physically visual traits, such as hair and eye color and facial structure. Once gene therapy was developed, it stampeded past the hit-and-miss practices of the Dark Ages and created the monsters we all know here in Zhestokiy. Creatures who are capable of surviving in a climate and region that is inversely suitable for their biological and physiological composition.”

Imayoshi paused, lifting his hand to inspect the wound inflicted to his shoulder. “Though I suppose I should be more magnanimous. It’s not as though your ancestors pioneered the idea. Since time immemorial, Lightning Apparitions have brandished their hostility against any who opposed them, treating their victims with humiliation and brutality. Genetic pillaging was just one of many outlets. However because of your cursed family, over the last 400 years, they have had a hand in dramatically reshaping the Lightning Apparitions into a beast all together separate from what they once were. A wolf may wear a sheep’s hide but it will always reek of a wolf.”

Aomine bared his teeth at the slight. But then remembered something from his youth. A lesson exposing the grim consequences of naiveté and gullibility.

Imayoshi seemed in need of a refresher.

“The beast you reared will make you his prey for gratitude cannot change nature.”

Recognition lit up Imayoshi’s face for a brief moment before exhaustion regained its grip.

“The shepherd’s folly.” Imayoshi scoffed a laugh. “Given the events that have since unfolded, leaving you to your death would have been my most incriminating mistake.”

Aomine knew he spoke the truth. Although with a golden nugget of need-to-know information missing.

Sakurai Ryou.

He recalled the way the little man looked at him during the most recent conference and what Kagami had told him in the forest.

*Says he delivered you and cared for you as a baby.*

Had the Kaizer’s secretary always been tossing glances at him and he just hadn’t noticed? Sakurai had, at least for a short time, raised him when his own mother could not.

A thought emerged, driving Aomine on. “Which is why you doctored my birth records to remove my biological connection to my father. There’s far more material to scour concerning the head of an empire than there is for an irrelevant government official. Denoting my relationship to my mother didn’t smudge the truth at all, either. Made supporting your lie a whole lot easier though,
didn’t it?”

Imayoshi nodded. “The atrocities committed by the Aomines and their coconspirators are very real as is the knowledge that over the last four centuries they have sired an inestimable crop of illegitimate children.”

“A bit of forgery and I blended right in with the rest of them.”

Another nod.

His anger simmered, exciting the earlier static to swarm inside him again.

He had to know. “Did the temple know all of this? Is that why they treated me like a pariah?”

Imayoshi stubbornly refused to respond. As desperately as Aomine wanted to accept petulance as admission, he wanted—no needed—to hear the words more.

“Answer me.” Bristly blue-white branches accompanied the command, racing down his shoulders and leaping from his fingertips to jab the flagstones.

Imayoshi resigned, bespectacled eyes alight with competition.

“I told them you were born of my sister and the Aomine man who violated her when she was captured. Such a person never existed, of course. But locating and securing a body double for him in this region shared by Fire and Lightning was not difficult at all. Furthermore, when I appeared to identify her corpse, I submitted that he was a hybrid. And therefore the resulting offspring would be a Neutral.”

Aomine’s anger ascended swiftly into rage. The frizzy plasmic cloud bloated, undulating in excitement, popping needle-thin sparks in warning. The fulcrum of his supposed-Neutrality hinged on the fantasy that his mother had been abducted by a family known for their extensive and heinous criminal rap sheet. Forced to conceive him as a result of repeated sexual and psychological abuse by her captors. An act implicitly condoned by the patriarch that ultimately claimed her for himself.

He finally understood. The intense glares from the temple residents. Their searing scrutiny a declaration of social rejection. Endlessly excluding him from social conventions. Undercutting or downright refuting his achievements. Blatantly challenging his authority and demeaning his hard-earned licenses.

They hated him. Not just for his broadcasted Neutrality. But the cause of his disease.

The name Aomine and the reputation carried with it. A name that deserved neither sympathy nor respect nor courtesy.

Not even for a defenseless child. Harried by relentless frustration and confusion. Wondering what he did to be born so abnormally. Constantly estimating the hurdles he would have to vault to obtain even a fraction of goodwill yet never succeeding.

Violent tremors racking his muscles snapped his focus back to the present. Spires of thick white-hot light towered like enraged bull’s horns from his chest and shoulders. He took a moment to collect himself. Counting down from ten, pacing his breath, concentrating on wrangling back the current.

The outrage on the plateau yesterday was still fresh in his mind. When he’d come close to losing
himself. He needed to regain control and moments later he had it, dialing the untamed charge to a steady flicker.

“Telling them I was a Neutral,” he said to Imayoshi, who did not react to the display, “and persuading me with your modified stories wasn’t enough. You tried to implement normalcy into my life. To give me the illusion of fulfillment so I would be distracted. So I wouldn’t try to uncover the truth about my parents. About my lineage. By marrying Satsuki…” His voice trailed, a sudden knot engorging in his throat.

Tears stung his eyes and he couldn’t not stop himself from saying, “You killed my children.”

Imayoshi’s stiff mask of indifference cracked at the assertion.

“Because you knew what they would become. That they would represent a piece of either her or me. Contrary to that Neutral fallacy you shoved down my throat since I could speak. You couldn’t risk exposing your lie. To face what you’d done by letting them live.”

Words warbled with discordant emotions but he refused to submit to anguish. Squeezing his eyes shut for a moment quelled the building pressure.

“So you killed them,” he continued. “You talked me and Satsuki, two barely-there juveniles, into a premature marriage you knew wouldn’t work and pressured me into creating a family you had no intention of letting me keep. Do you have any idea the torment she endured?” He hesitated, waiting to see if the words jarred a reaction.

Nothing.

“They were just infants,” he said, voice cracking. “Newborns. Completely defenseless and innocent.”

Imayoshi’s silence persisted, his gaze tipped away but his ears grabbed every word.

“I was easier for you that way.” He was not going to cut Imayoshi any slack. “That’s why you didn’t override my divorce. You knew if you didn’t intervene there existed a possibility that another child would be conceived if Satsuki and I stayed together. The more time I spent with her, the less reliant on you I would become. And why wouldn’t I be? I was fifty years old when you married us. A hormonal brat wrestling through the tar pit of puberty. So you granted our separation while our wounds of parenthood were still raw. Driving me right to you, seeking validation. Consoling me that my defect wasn’t responsible. That sometimes unfortunate things happen beyond our control.”

His neck throbbed and he attempted a forced swallow to relax the muscles.

Kagami’s words from a week ago invaded his brain.

In the holding cell.

*It never bothered you that Imayoshi lied away your case of sterility by admission of a birth defect?*

*What about the fact that you’re the master hunter and Imayoshi’s Ambassador? It was handed to you. Because your pathetic uncle pitied your lonely existence and gave you something to make you appear more important than you really are.*

Then last night in the forest.
You’ve been his hostage, Aomine. Not his family. The only reason he didn’t kill you was because he planned from the start to manipulate you. He may have been your uncle.

The knot became thorny and pressure flooded his head. Static crackled around his aching fists, still clenched tight.

Imayoshi’s vacant eyes stared back.

But you were never his nephew.

Crinkly bands netted his chest, feeding into the current pulsing down his arms and he waited. To hear something.

Anything.

“I did what I had to do,” Imayoshi finally said.

The spiny rock clogging his throat plummeted into his stomach.

“You’re pathetically naïve.” With a tender smile, Imayoshi added, “Just like your parents.”

Aomine’s blood ran cold.

“Your parents. Their body doubles. Daichi’s ex-wife. Your three children. Hyuuga Junpei. All were necessary sacrifices to achieve an end that you cannot comprehend.”

Imayoshi sighed. Stress left his battered body and he seemed to welcome the weary slump of fatigue. Satisfaction creased his eyes.

Aomine’s skin numbed, his nerves frayed. He lifted his right arm, his dark skin blanched by dozens of writhing electric wires. Stiff fingers capped the traitor’s coarse, disheveled head.

Imayoshi did not try to pull back.

Rather he pressed forward.

Intense eyes aggravated the current. Digging and prodding, Do it.

“Go to hell, you fucking monster.”

He gripped Imayoshi’s skull.

And unleashed the storm.

Chapter End Notes

Points of Clarification

* Bokoku, Motherland, is a state of the Fire Apparition kingdom located in China. It was once shared by the Fire and Ice when they were the Xia Union.

* Pervobytnyy Les, Primeval Forest, is the massive country of the Lightning Apparitions located in Russia. Though most Lightning Apparitions only live in the
southern and western regions.

*Zhestokiy* is the current empirical administration of the Lightning Apparitions. Sometimes it is used interchangeably with *Pervobytnyy Les* to identity the country of the Lightning.

*Aomine and the Shepherd's Folly*--The lesson Aomine references is actually a variant of the idiom "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" and has biblical origins, though the excerpt I extracted comes a poem from a Greek anthology. The meaning is more or less the same.

*Aomine and Momoi's marriage*--Ice Apparition culture allows for couples to marry as early as 30 years old (about 10 years old for humans) but it has become more commonplace and legally acceptable to wait until the couple reaches 60 years of age (20 years old for humans). Marriages are approved by the senior-most member of the two families. Imayoshi as Aomine's legal guardian, initiated his marriage to Satsuki at just 50 years old (roughly 16 years old for humans), which vexplains Aomine's mention of being a *hormonal brat* at that time.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

“Get off me,” Aomine yelled.

“You’ve done enough for today.”

“Let go,”

“Don’t you get it now?” Kagami asked. “It’s over.”

Chapter Notes

The things I do to survive in the Adult World TM. Overtime back to back and a return to bootcamp totally drained me. I just hope the sacrifice was worth it when payroll comes up, lol I need that money and beach body for Mexico in a few months woo!

I'm not gonna lie, editing this chapter was a pain in the ass so I'm apologizing up front if there are some inconsistencies or confusion...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kagami kept his vision sealed as gravity again weighed his body. That’s what he hated about teleporting. All the convenience of instantaneous movement at the expense of feeling your flesh squished and kneaded by invisible hands. It had never helped, nor had it ever been advised, but he always closed his eyes. It didn’t erase the bizarre sensation of nothingness but distracted him long enough to tolerate the journey.

His foot found hard flooring. Smooth and flat. Izuki’s subtle but insistent tugging on his hand guided him from the darkness. The spymaster had stepped out first to take point.

Both feet settled. Numbness blanketed his skin, gradually lifting.

Blinking cleared his sight.

Izuki’s grip disappeared and Kagami swept a look around. Before him a naked alabaster wall ran long in either direction, butting with Moorish arches that let farther into the palace. Natural light seeped in from the portals, cutting a sharp umbra where he and Izuki stood. He searched up and found, fifteen feet overhead, a depressed ceiling. The belly of a stairway landing.

He shook the fogginess from his brain, orienting himself.

“Casimir’s lobby?”

He turned to Izuki, only he was no longer there.

“Under the grand staircase.”
Kagami started and whirled to the voice behind him. Half of Izuki’s body hung free from the haze coating the underside of the stairs.

The spymaster pointed to the left archway. “Upper quad of the courtyard. Go, and quick.”

Kagami hustled to the yawning staircase. A stale ache still permeated his injured knee but it was nothing he couldn’t ignore.

The babble of a fountain reached his ears as he neared then was suddenly overritten by an ominous, running rumble. Like thunder.

A raspy scream pierced his ears.

He plunged into the arcade, clearing the short leg in swift bounds and cutting the corner tight. As he charged on, through the columns whipping by, a ball of bluish-white light strobed. Skinny arms flailed outward from the mass. Determination geared his muscles to push harder. The fifty feet between him and the colonnaded walk bisecting the courtyard shrunk to forty. Then thirty. Twenty.

Two figures materialized in the upper quad amidst the savage flickering of a gushing lightning bolt. One sat on the half-wall of the walk. The other was positioned within the maelstrom of frizzy plasma. The source of the strike.

A scene he’d witnessed before.

And feeding the current was Aomine.

Fifteen feet reeled away. Ten left.

Five feet from break in the arcade wall, he saw it.

Knelt before Aomine, screaming and engulfed in a raging torrent of static, was Imayoshi Shouichi. It was then that he noticed, unlike the mishap on the plateau cliff, the current was being channeled down. Electrocuting his quarry.

He was going to kill Imayoshi.

Shit.

Kagami vaulted clear over the steps into the colonnaded walk. Pressure clutched his knee as his soles slammed down but he sprinted on, weaving through the gap in the half-wall. Neither Aomine nor Imayoshi --nor the mysterious figure--yet registered his intrusion. A definite advantage that could easily become a detriment. He recalled the last time he’d torn Aomine from a supercharged stupor. As well as what happened after. He needed to be ready.

Fortunately, he was approaching Aomine from behind. His rear left vulnerable as the current’s ferocity was concentrated on the threat before him.

Kagami inhaled a sharp breath and lunged with one last push.

*Go for the flesh. Whatever there is.*

He plowed into the hunter’s back. The blow disoriented Aomine. The jagged stream broke, blipping away.

Imayoshi’s cries faded into an incoherent garble then silence.
He had to act fast. One arm lassoed Aomine’s neck, the other hooking under an arm.

Aomine thrashed more vigorously than he had in the Water Room when trying to break free of the ice. When his life was actually in danger. Adrenaline spiked Kagami’s muscles to cinch his hold.

“Get off me,” Aomine yelled.

_De-escalate. Calm him down._

Kagami braced himself and attempted to drag the hunter back. Away from Imayoshi.

The Dan had collapsed, face down on the stones, wisps of smoke billowing from his twitching body.

“Enough, Aomine.”

The hunter wasn’t backing down. If anything the sight of Imayoshi in a vulnerable state seemed to further provoke his aggression. Hackles jutted from his nape, jabbing at Kagami’s face and neck. Blunt nails raked his arms as Aomine clawed, kicking and bucking to free himself.

The violent trashing was sapping Kagami’s strength and he swallowed the bitter pill of futility. The distance between aggressor and victim had not shrunk. Diplomacy wasn’t working and to continue trying only increased his chances of becoming an outlet for retaliation. Hatred and loss were fueling the fires of rage, disintegrating rational thought from the forefront and unless he acted, Aomine would quickly overpower him.

He needed to buckle Aomine’s resistance. And he knew exactly how to do it. Consequences be damned.

He readied himself. Aomine hinged forward, preparing to snap back, and Kagami reacted. He threw his full weight onto the hunter’s back, challenging Aomine’s balance. Aomine kicked a foot out, stabilizing. Stray bolts peppered his skin. He curled his arm tighter, wedging Aomine’s throat against tensed muscles and sealed the hold.


He pushed at Kagami’s elbow to dislodge himself.

Kagami expected him, as a student of Nebuya Eikichi, to know how to escape sleeper holds.

That chance would not come.

He popped his boot into the hunter’s knee and Aomine staggered, clutching at Kagami’s firm arm for support. With the hunter’s head tucked neatly, Kagami flexed. Bracing his wrist with his other hand, he applied pressure and counted down.

Ten, nine, eight.

Aomine’s resistance weakened.

Seven, six, five.

Aomine’s arms slid away. Legs wobbled, dropping his weight into Kagami’s caging arm.

Only a few more seconds.
Four, three.

Aomine slackened. Kagami lowered his hips, bending his knees.

Two.

He folded with Aomine to the ground.

One.

Kagami’s arm unlocked, draped loose around the hunter’s chest. And he waited.

Ten seconds was more than enough to incapacitate Aomine. Cutting off the airway, rather than the arteries feeding the brain, was a common mistake in chokeholds applied by novices. The risk of injury was high. Performed correctly, however, could easily neutralize a potentially fatal confrontation. But he needed to be ready. Another misconception about sleeper holds was that contrary to the name of the technique, the afflicted did not sleep.

Aomine would rouse within seconds. Maybe a minute.

When he did, he would not be happy.

“Do you think that wise?”

Kagami craned a look over his shoulder, behind him toward the colonnaded walk. Seated on the half-wall was the ambiguous figure he’d gleaned. One leg was kicked up on the edge, a dagger sprouting from the thigh. Back pressed to a pillar in a slouch that looked anything but comfortable. Arms crossed over the stomach and protruding from one was another dagger.

Akashi’s blank face stared back.

Anger swirled within him.

Of course Akashi would have everything to do with this. A cursory glance of his brother’s body confirmed that the Lord and Dan had squared off. Considering that Akashi was sitting ringside when Kagami entered the scene, it was a safe bet the battle happened before Aomine’s arrival. And why wouldn’t it? Aomine would not have allowed Akashi to interfere in his personal business. Meaning Akashi provided the opportunity for Aomine to confront a weakened Imayoshi who could not pose a threat. Furthermore, Akashi had done nothing to interrupt Aomine from potentially executing the Dan. Akashi’s censure of Imayoshi was a broadly-known sentiment. The Lord could not afford to agitate the international community into an uproar if he somehow managed to terminate his top contender.

Which only made Kagami more suspicious of Akashi’s presence.

So he asked, “Would you have let him kill Imayoshi?”

Akashi’s vacant gaze yielded no answer. He lifted his uninjured arm, a cell phone in his hand.

“Keep an eye on him.” The Lord slid his thumb across the device’s finger pad then lifted the receiver to his ear. “All clear. IS is down. AD contained. Out.”

Kagami scowled at the dismissal.

Wetness blobbed his arm.
Aomine groaned, muscles slowly working the hunter’s slumped head upright. Compression that had jammed the highways of his carotid arteries were now cleared and blood was reigning the brain.

“Disgusting,” he said. “You drooled.”

Aomine did not respond, his perception recalibrating. His weight dropped back into Kagami’s chest. If he had to guess, Aomine was struggling to connect the dots. Moments passed and the hunter’s head tipped down, chin pressing into his forearm.

Aomine froze. Then panic geared his limp legs to back pedal. He pushed at Kagami’s arm, still rung loose around him.

Kagami instantly tightened the noose in warning and the silent message was received.

Aomine stopped, hesitant but unafraid.

“No,” he said.

Aomine cautiously scooted himself to sit upright. As if to test Kagami, he leaned forward.

Kagami drew him back with a firm nudge. “You’ve done enough for today.”

Fractured hairs of thin light webbed Aomine’s nape again. Looked like he was getting the hang of bearing his teeth, Kagami thought. Though he was bearing them at the wrong person.

“You choked me out.”

He did not rise to the accusation.

“Let go.”

Rapid clacking echoed from nearby, growing closer. From the lobby.

“I’m not here to stroke your hair and tell you everything’s gonna be okay. I will do it again if you don’t behave.” He allowed for the threat to sink in. “Besides, you’re out of time.”

From the arcade portals, Apparitions flooded. Around a dozen total sporting military drab skittered into the courtyard. Four men from the east arcade swarmed Imayoshi’s body.

Emblazoned on the men’s sleeves Kagami caught the distinct emblem of the Lightning military’s private branch, responsible for securing the palace. The Kaizer’s guard.

Revolt evaporated from Aomine as the men encircled the Dan. Kagami registered the changed and alleviated pressure, though like before kept a faint hold.

“Do you get it now?” he asked.

One of the four shouldered a bundle from their back and unfurled a thick blanket. Wider than it was long. Leather straps dangled free, buckles clacking against the stones as it was flattened near the body. No vents or holes pocked the wool, the idea being to restrict airflow and maximize the diffusion of heat. Making the prisoner weary and less combative. An Ice-Apparition-only subjugation measure. The remaining three soldiers lifted Imayoshi onto the blanket and maneuvered him into the folds. The fourth manned the belts, fastening them tight. Shocks of the Dan’s black hair erupted from the top of the bundle, the only evidence he was wrapped inside.
Pounding boots drew Kagami’s attention toward the west arcade, behind him. Six soldiers approached the walk. Three descended into the courtyard. The others hung back in the arcade.

Sights locked on the soldiers, he said to Aomine, “It’s over.”

At first, nothing. Then Aomine huffed a choked sigh and resignation sagged his muscles. Kagami slowly unwound his arm, eying the hunter for any signs of deceit. Aomine did not budge, gaze honed on the scene of Imayoshi’s arrest.

Kagami again regarded the soldiers. One was in hushed conversation with Akashi, still seated on the half-wall. The other two were stalking over. Their determined gait and inflated posture told Kagami their aim was not a meet-and-greet.

They were coming for Aomine.

It seemed Zhestokiy wanted to keep this incident close to the vest. Controlling all eyes and ears. Kagami assumed the involvement of the Kaizer’s private guard was conditional for Hayakawa’s complicity since it was most likely these soldiers that expedited clearing the place out for the showdown. Despite arrangements, Kagami suspected Hayakawa machinated his own take of the operation’s success. Characteristic of negotiating with the Lightning. Always prioritizing their special interests even if it meant backstabbing their allies to obtain their gains.

The soldiers stopped a dozen feet away. Close enough not to suggest a threat but not too far that their presences could be ignored. Puffed chests and drawn shoulders delivered a silent but imposing command to obey.

Another aggravating quality.

Kagami clapped Aomine’s shoulder, wrangling his attention.

He leaned close and whispered, “If you know what’s good for you, do not move from this spot.”

Keeping the soldiers in sight, and his voice out of earshot, he added, “Mouth shut, eyes and ears open.”

Aomine gave a dilatory nod. Still out of sorts, Kagami supposed.

So long as he did what he was told.

Kagami stood, straightened his spine, and approached the uniforms.

Chapter End Notes

Points of Clarification

* **Zhestokiy** is the current empirical administration of the Lightning Apparitions. Sometimes it is used interchangeably with Pervobytnyy Les to identity the country of the Lightning.

* **Teleport(ing)** is the innate skill of Shadow Apparitions to absorb themselves into a mass of shadows for the purposes of instantaneous travel, offensive tactics, reconnoitering/intelligence operations, or self-defensive maneuvers (to escape threats)

* **Sleeper Hold**, like Kagami addresses, is a technique that compresses the victim's
arteries to cause the flow of blood to the brain to be obstructed and compel the victim to pass out. A mistake made often is to crush the airway, as the trachea and carotid arteries are housed tightly together in the neck, thus risking suffocation rather than incapacitating. I conducted research to ensure Kagami performed this maneuver correctly and while there is some arguments about the duration a person is unconscious, the general consensus by expert opinions I've read is that 10 seconds is more than enough and the person will awaken in about that time after the hold is released. The point of a sleeper hold is for the attacker to press the arteries which cage the airway into their bent arm, leaving the trachea unpressured. (inexperienced police officers screw this up all the time when they "choke out" suspects because they're compressing the wrong areas of the throat.)
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Confusion tugged at Aomine's face. “I do them the favor of decommissioning Imayoshi and they're trying to arrest me?”

“They want you for Hyuuga.”

Aomine scowled. “For which I’m innocent.”

Chapter Notes

Two updates in one day. As I said on the previous update, editing this chapter was a bitch, so please forgive any inconsistencies or confusion (though I really hope there isn't any ;- ; )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aomine stared at the flagstones. Tape outlined a crude geometric shape representing a body that had crumpled to the ground. Imayoshi, and the soldiers who collected him, were long gone. More adhesive strips marked the upper quad, surrounding wounds dealt to the area as a result of the skirmish between the sovereigns. The pillar of the half-wall where Akashi no longer sat was also tagged with tape.

Once the arresting officers toted the Dan away, soldiers lingering in the west arcade ushered the Lord toward the castle’s lobby. For questioning and medical treatment, he surmised.

When he appraised Akashi before confronting Imayoshi, it was apparent that the Lord did not secure a flawless victory. Something to be expected of a diseased Apparition. The affliction was no secret and rather than a tarnishing detriment it served to establish unprecedented rapport among colleagues and political adversaries that made clear the Lord never failed to deliver on his promises. Weighed down by vulnerability, the Lord had nothing to lose in gambling with confidence. Aomine considered himself impressed. Truth be told, he didn’t believe Akashi a capable fighter, his intellect far too advanced to be reduced to physical brutality.

Shortly after the Lord was escorted away, more soldiers made an attempt to remove Aomine. Kagami rebuffed the interlopers, like he had the first two, and allocated permission to isolate Aomine out of the way to await Akashi’s return.

He wondered where Kagami disappeared to after that. The prince had stuck around long enough to verify that Aomine would be left alone. Thereafter, he and the two uniforms stalked off toward the west arcade. Aomine could only assume to the lobby where he, too, would be questioned.

That was four hours ago. And still he sat against the wall of the west arcade, looking into the upper quad. How Kagami justified just scooting him out of the survey cordon instead of containing him in a more secure location with fewer escape routes and minimal surveillance, he did not know.
Indicative of the Lightning’s specialized brand of bureaucracy, nothing had been communicated to him. Palace staff had not returned to work nor had additional security been implemented. Of the dozen guards that stormed the courtyard, two resided in the east arcade across the way, positioned at the portals letting in and out. He could be certain of at least one sentinel posted behind him, as only a few times had shout outs volleyed around the courtyard.

Save for two investigators that had puttered around the upper quad, no one else had been permitted through the flimsy perimeter. Aomine had watched them work. Dissecting the scene. Accentuating evidence with tape. Scribbling their findings on clipboards tethered around their necks. Occasionally a guard would be approached or brought onto the scene, possibly to contribute a second-opinion or provide a statement.

Aomine imagined the Fire brothers were enduring a separate, more intense array of questioning from Hayakawa and his private guard. He wondered the importance of scrutinizing Kagami and not him. The neglect further soured his mood as minutes rolled into hours. There was nothing to distract him once the investigators left.

Nothing to stop his imagination from running rampant.

*Mouth shut, ears and eyes open.*

Kagami’s advisory from before. Despite his rising temper and desire to be informed—or even acknowledged—Aomine kept a firm leash on his composure.

Didn’t make it any easier to accept.

Hefty footsteps slapped the stones beside him. Aomine’s stare broke, zipping down. Hiking boots.

He looked up. Kagami had dropped, seven feet down, over the arcade wall. One hand held an aluminum tumbler.

“Akashi’s wrapping things up,” Kagami said, dangling the container.

He accepted the offering, asking, “What is this?”

“Just drink it.”

Aomine lifted the container to his lips.

“It’s chamomile tea with honey.”

Aomine choked down a swallow and cut Kagami an annoyed look. “Again with this.”

He was tired of being suppressed. His emotions being dampened and conciliated.

Kagami barked, “It’s not like that.” He collected himself. “I just thought it’d help you feel better.”

Aomine’s mouth bowed but he tipped the tumbler for another draw of the sweet earthy tea. “How altruistic.”

Kagami grunted, clearly bothered by the sarcasm but was otherwise quiet.

Four more swallows emptied the container. He dropped his skull back to the wall, enjoying the soothing slide warming his throat and soaking his gut.

He stared at the sky. Bruised clouds hung thicker than earlier though had not yet released a much-
anticipated deluge.

“Are you going to ignore me, too?” he asked. “Or are you going to explain why I’ve been sitting at a crime scene, minimally supervised, in enemy territory, for the better part of four hours?”

“You should be more grateful they left you alone,” Kagami grunted. “Several times the soldiers detailed to oversee the courtyard attempted to circumvent Akashi and I and take you. Every time we’ve thwarted them.”

Confusion tugged at his face, head rolling to regard Kagami. “I do them the favor of decommissioning Imayoshi and they’re trying to arrest me?”

“They want you for Hyuuga.”

Aomine scowled. “For which I’m innocent.”

Another gloomy gray day drifted back to him. Much like today where he was trapped between persecution and escape by Kagami. A race through musty stone hallways and the echo of condemnation that had since been his bane.

“And that the whole world and those assholes believe it is entirely your stupid ass fault.”

Aomine threw down the tumbler, the resounding warble as it clattered away making Kagami cringe.

“How many times do I have to apologize?”

Aomine didn’t care for the exasperation straining Kagami’s voice. His anger was building. He still possessed no answers to his dilemma. Instead left to rot under the beady-eyed glare of predators lurking just out of reach, foaming at the mouth to catch him unaware and pounce. With Imayoshi in custody, his future in the temple seemed uncertain.

And what of Satsuki? Though he clutched onto the feeble hope that Tetsu had survived his encounter with Imayoshi, he couldn’t escape the miasma of doubt convincing him that Kagami had lifted his spirits too high.

He couldn’t waste time with a dead-end investigation. The Lightning were going to pin him for Hyuuga’s death anyway, no matter what they uncovered or who refuted them. He needed to be home. In Goryokaku, with Satsuki.

Aomine jerked to his feet, giving brusque clearing swipes to his pants.

“I’ve had enough of your platitudes,” he said. “I’m leaving.”

Kagami squared up. “The hell you are.”

Frizzy electric wires exploded from Aomine’s neck and shoulders in warning. “Stay out of my way.”

Anger flushed Kagami’s face. “Did you not hear me, two minutes ago, when I said Akashi and I have been redirecting the soldiers from taking you into custody?”

“If not for his benefit, then for yours.”

Kagami’s face scrunched.
"They may not have been friends beyond paper but Hyuuga was a high-value interest to Akashi that kept their combined concerns aloft. He’s gone, the crosshairs trained on my back, and with no witnesses to attest to my innocence, you think he’s gonna take it on the chin and let me walk?"

He did not allow Kagami a chance to speak, adding, “Then there’s you.”

Flickers budded on Kagami’s neck. “You think I’m itching to take you out the second we secure you,” his voice escalated, dialing the blipping flame into a bristling mane. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Friends today are enemies tomorrow.” He jabbed a finger. “And that blade angled twice into my chest is all the assurance I needed. We were never friends.”

“So I did all that literal backbreaking work to extract you and keep you from getting killed, all so you could be reunited with your passive-aggressive ex-wife, was all for a warm fuzzy?”

Aomine sneered at the mockery, coils of springy static leaping from him like a dog on a short chain.

“Do that,” he snapped. “Paint yourself a hero if it helps you sleep better at night.”

He started to walk around Kagami.

An arm shot into his path, colliding into his chest.

“Throwing a tantrum because I won’t give you what you want?”

Lightning swathed Aomine’s chest, gushing down his shoulders and swarming Kagami’s arm. The prince tensed at the assault but did not lift the blockade. Emotion churned violently in him. Pushing into his throat. Flooding his head.

He could feel Kagami’s heated gaze and knew he couldn’t rise to meet it. Through clenched teeth, he said, “Step. Aside.”

“This is my final warning, Aomine. There are two ways you’re leaving this courtyard. Either you walk,” he paused, leaning closer and capturing Aomine’s full attention. “Or you don’t.”

From nearby, a voice interjected, “I would rather he walk, if it’s all the same to you, Taiga.”

Kagami cut a glance that after a stubborn moment Aomine followed. Akashi stood atop the stairs of the colonnaded walk, in the west arcade, looking through the pillars. The Lord’s injured arm was bandaged, splinted, and cradled in a sling. Butterfly adhesives patched the left cheek. The uniform of the Fire’s vanguard forces still draped his body. Apart from looking exhausted, his heterochromatic eyes remained alert and calculating.

The current bathing Aomine weakened. Kagami’s flames extinguished.

Akashi descended and stepped into the upper quad.

“While I’m sure he is in dire need of rest,” he said to Kagami, “and you a relief of what I assume has been a constant headache, I’m afraid a concussion is out of the question. So, too, is another short-lived choke out or short-circuiting him.” He smiled. “You can argue about whose-fault-is-whose on the train back to Hirosawa.”

Aomine wondered about the meaning of short-circuit.
Before he could object, Kagami spoke. “If you must know, what I want is to get the fuck out of here. So thank you for taking forever negotiating our out.”

“I know politics and levelheadedness is a far-reaching concept for you, little brother, but foreplay is a necessary evil for my bedfellows.”

Kagami groaned in disgust. “Are we free to go or not?”

“The hell I’m going back to Hirosawa with you loonies,” Aomine said.

Akashi’s brows hiked in interest. “I’m sorry.”

“You heard me. I’ll tell you the same thing I told him,” he said to Akashi, pointing at Kagami. “I did you Rus-Ainu fuckers a favor by neutralizing Imayoshi. My job’s done. I am going home, assuming your hell hounds haven’t run amuck and obliterated it by now with you two trapping me here.” Emotion drove his voice loud and curt.

“You didn’t allow me to finish. What I was going to say was,”—levity vanished from Akashi’s face, replaced by a stark seriousness—”you have no choice.”

Aomine squinted. “The fuck are you talking about?”

“Again with the language.” Akashi looked to his brother. “Here I thought it was only you, Taiga.”

Irritation claimed Kagami’s face. He raised a hand, the tips of his index finger and thumb touching, and flicked. The Lord received the insult with a smirk. Aomine understood the gesture to be offensive to Fire Apparitions, originating within the Xia Union as a representation of fire, the mouth formed by the curled fingers implying greed. The added flick strengthened the vulgarity.

Lightning leaped from Aomine with renewed energy, fed by agitation.

He glared at Akashi. “The other arm’s not broken yet shrimp, but it will be soon.”

Amusement brightened the Lord’s eyes. “Quick to anger with threats of violence, too. Where have I experienced this before?”

With a loud sigh, Kagami said to him, “Foreplay means conditions.”

He appreciated the change of tack.

“Correct,” Akashi supplied. “An awkward followerless tango, negotiating with the Lightning. No matter on whose head the crown sits, they always persist to steer the dance to their beat. I myself am not one for being dipped. Gives me a bit of vertigo.”

Aomine’s muscles tensed to the point of ache, the blanket of lightning flickering and undulating in distress. His throat swelled tight, eyes tired and pulsing with a deep throb as tears threatened to erupt.

“I am tired,” he said through a shaky breath. “I am frustrated. I am…” his cracking voice trailed and he steadied himself. “Get to the damn point, half pint.”

Akashi merely smiled. “The most important condition is that you will be coming with us to Hirosawa.” He added, with emphasis, “As an asset, not a prisoner. Any further details can wait.”

Kagami stood silent.
“Does that answer satisfy you?”

Aomine inhaled, the warm air doing little to soothe the unease and stress vibrating through him.

He mumbled, “Whatever.” Then he recalled what the Lord said moments ago. “Wait, you said train. Don’t you have a cadre of teleport experts that could expedite our travel?”

“As a matter of fact, I do. But as I am sure you remember, our nations are embroiled in a nasty little squabble which commands their skills and attention more than I do.”

“Regardless of their allegiance to the Fire crown,” Kagami said to Aomine, “sticking you with any one of the grade-As we have on retainer would not stop them from exacting vengeance on you for what you’ve done to their compatriots. You’re their boogeyman.”

Aomine chewed his cheek. “So not only am I trapped in a cramped cabin with the two of you for the next two and a half days but I’m guessing my stay at the castle is both indeterminate and non-negotiable?”

The slight, amused lift of the Lord’s brows signaled confirmation.

Aomine groaned. “Wonderful.”

Kagami massaged his face, raking fingers through his darkened hair. The alteration, though hasty, was appealing, highlighting eyes that Aomine had found agitating and overly intense one week ago.

Kagami bobbed his head at Akashi. “So, is that it? Can we get the hell out of here now? I’m starving.”

“You just ate, like, an hour ago.”

Almost as if insulted, Kagami palmed his belly. “That was then, this is now.”

Aomine scoffed. “Can’t go one hour without a snack. It astounds me that you grazers aren’t obese.”

Kagami motioned at Aomine. “Says the bean pole.”

Before Aomine could retort, Akashi rose a halting hand. “I’ll be more than happy to stuff your gobs to induce a well-deserved food coma for your joint efforts today. When you come around you can spend all of Aomine’s undetermined time with us to belittle each other.”

Neither Kagami nor Aomine argued.

“Excellent. Just on time to catch our train.” He captured Kagami’s attention and pointed to the ground. “Taiga, if you would.”

Kagami stared at Akashi, brow cocked, and said, “Your legs ain’t broke.”

“They could be. I won’t know until I see my physician. Awaiting me onboard our private train cars.” Again, the finger commanded.

“And what do I get out of piggybacking your spoiled ass?”

“A thank you.”
Kagami sighed, rolling his eyes. “Unbelievable.”

With an exasperated groan, he turned and knelt. His face contorted with a twinge of discomfort. His knee must still ache from Nebuya’s attack. The Lord shrugged off the sling and shuffled over. Peeking through a slash in the pant leg, Aomine caught more dressings. Akashi draped himself across his brother’s back, arms hanging over the shoulders. Sprinkling the rear of the Lord’s right side like stardust were small punctures, stretching from wrist to hip to calf. Unbandaged and darkened with dried blood. Definitely the work of Imayoshi. Grade-A assassins carried a limited cache of throwing knives, the popular staple being a solid twelve. Aomine gleaned more than two dozen puncture wounds.

Kagami secured Akashi’s legs and stood.

Unease crept back up on Aomine. Though not fatal, the Lord endured extensive superficial and moderate injuries that required at least basic medical attention. Removing and treating the dagger wounds he understood as important. But prioritizing a minor flesh wound to the face? Gone four hours, receiving scant treatment. It became clear to Aomine that nearly all of the Lord’s time was, in fact, spent negotiating with Hayakawa.

And he did not like the prospects that lengthy discourse entailed.

Kagami strode toward the colonnaded walk.

“Come along, Aomine,” Akashi said.

Could this even be called freedom?

Aomine sucked a breath and followed.

Chapter End Notes

Points of Clarification

* **Short-circuit** is an immobilization technique exclusive to Lightning Apparitions. By depressing a cluster of nerves along the clavicle (between the neck and shoulder), a Lightning Apparition’s electromagnetic channels will be temporarily interrupted, causing widespread paralysis for a few minutes.

* **All Aboard to Hirosawa.** The estimation of train travel from Casimir to Hirosawa is a rough estimate based on the mileage of extant raillines in Russia, Mongolia, and China.

* **Grazer** is the dietary habit attributed to Fire Apparitions because to sustain their accelerated metabolisms, they have to consume nourishment throughout the day.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Kuroko dropped his chin to his chest. “I’m so sorry, baba.”

Izuki threw his arms around him and pulled him close. “No more, Tupfen.”

Chapter Notes

How is it already May?? My gosh, time flies when you're trapped in the jaws of adulthood, responsibility, and constant fatigue. I am, however pleased to be presenting not one, but TWO updates. I've had these baddies ready to go for at least a week but due to the aforementioned, plus planning a big vacation next month, I haven't had any sit-down time to post either. I almost felt like a stranger giving them a final review, so I apologize for any confusion that may have happened while editing.

Enjoy! And as always, thank you! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HIROSAWA, MEDICAL ANNEX

Kuroko woke to the pleasing aroma of mint and coffee. His eyes eased open, the earlier sensitivity tempered with a potent cocktail of Pharmaceuticals he had been dosed before and after surgery. After a brief period of post-op observation, he was ushered to occupy a bed in the recovery ward.

Where he now lay. A table lamp cast a dreary incandescent glow off the homey maple-panels, replacing the invasive wall of windows of his last room. Transparency had made for uninterrupted supervision of his condition after the operation, despite the procedure being considered minor by the staff. This door, however, was unbroken by glass or metal frames and allowed him repose. Not a sound disturbed the silence.

He lifted his arms, back bowing in a careful stretch. A shudder slithered up his spine and he moaned, flattening to the mattress.

“That sounded like it felt good.”

Kuroko lolled his head toward the soft-spoken voice. Izuki sat on the loveseat situated in front of a window. No natural light stained the shears. A book rested open across the spymaster’s lap and gripped in his hand was a steaming paper cup. Mint-laced black coffee. Izuki swore the supplement, acting together with the caffeine, made him more alert and focused. Hogwash, Kuroko knew. The extract served to disguise the bitterness without diluting the drink’s potency with sugar or milk.
Kuroko swiped his eyes with his wrists, mindful of the gauze wrapping his fingers.

“What time is it?” he asked.

Izuki turned a page, attention on the book. “Two A.M.” As though reading his thoughts, he added, “You slept a long time.”

Kuroko nestled into the pillow. “Where is Momoi-san?”

“Back there.”

Kuroko sat up, peering over the end of the bed. No footboard obstructed his view and through the ambient haze cloaking the farthest reaches of the room, he spotted her. Curled beneath a sheet tucked up to her nose on a folding cot was Momoi. The lamp on the nightstand centralized the distribution of light around him. Without Izuki he would not have noticed her.

The book clapped closed and Izuki gestured toward her with it. “The staff attempted to lend her an empty bed in a nearby room but she refused to leave you alone. Even reminded them of my threat that she not be excluded from your care in this hospital. As you can see, she also did not want to restrict the staff’s access to you, either. She crashed an hour ago.”

Kuroko stared into his lap.

Izuki tipped the cup to his lips, savoring a long swallow.

Silence dominated the room once again.

Apprehension festered within Kuroko. For thirty-four years, he had anticipated this moment. What had once been woeful longing was now replaced by deep-seated dread. All the words he had exhaustibly pondered to say all seemed to be nothing more than the hackneyed justifications of a selfish and hapless fool. An apology would be a pathetic plea of forgiveness. The excuse of helplessness or duress? A mockery of decades spent teaching, cultivating, and refining every technique and tactic in Kuroko’s arsenal.

Izuki stood, dropping the book to the cushions. He polished off the last of the coffee and tabled the cup.

He sat near the foot of the bed.

Kuroko stiffened.

“For the longest time,” Izuki began, “I had hoped Imayoshi’s assertions were true. That rather than being a prisoner of war, you had fallen valiantly to your quarry. As your fellow Herzkind had.”

He said nothing, absorbing the dialect of home. A lingual marriage of the old world Turkic and new world Germanic. As well as a blatant refusal to let slip the past, surviving in the spoken word.

Herzkind. The expression rocked his soul. One he had not uttered or heard in many years. At the height of the Lightning’s genocide campaign against the Shadow in the 1300s, the target of the onslaught were adults. Children and seniors, too feeble to substantiate the nation’s fighting force, were spared. Left without parental guidance, youths banded together to form close-knit communities of patchwork families. Lacking blood ties but still upholding traditional social etiquettes, values, and roles, feelings of adoration expected of siblings blossomed naturally and the children came to call one another Herzkind. A stitch-up expression compounded from the newly-introduced Germanic words heart and kin.
Bonds beyond blood.

That’s what Haizaki, Moriyama, Mitobe, and Hanamiya had been to Kuroko. For all their idiosyncrasies and flaws, their synonymous backgrounds as society’s rejects unified them in a pact of brotherhood and family no one else could hope to understand.

Except Aomine. A brother in-kind who had experienced the debilitating and soul-crushing loneliness of parental abandonment and the ostracization as a result of the circumstances of his birth. Over the span of thirty-four years, their battered and bruised hearts, weeping for connection, healed one another. Accepting a love transcending nationhood and race. Punching a hole in the glass ceiling of platonic and sexual devotion. In Aomine, Kuroko found patience, warmth, and an uplifting spirit that shone like beams of celestial light through the exposed tears in his soul. Rather than highlighting the damage of his wounded heart, the light revealed a magnificent mosaic of himself that after years of obsession for vengeance and internalized self-loathing, he’d nearly forgotten existed.

Aomine Daiki was *Herzkind*.

Izuki did not react to his hesitation, sitting stiff as a statue.

His lips trembled, throat tightening as emotions churned. Eager that he divulge all while at the same time commanding he stay silent.

His vision rippled.

Then Izuki said, “I’m not angry, *Tupfen*.”

And the pressure that had been swelling ruptured. Tears streamed and he folded forward, shudders rocking his body as he sobbed. The bed creaked as Izuki shifted but no consoling hands grasped his shoulders or cupped his face. Kuroko drew his wounded hands close to his belly, shielding the disgraceful sight.

“I know it is difficult but I want you to speak.” Izuki gently pulled his arms from concealment. “I want to hear your real voice again. I want to see your eyes.”

He did not resist the manipulation. He took a few moments to calm himself. Using his shoulder, he dabbed his eyes dry and slowly leveled his gaze with Izuki’s. The spymaster was facing him, one leg folded on the mattress. His hands slid away and if not for the bandages Kuroko would have stopped him.

“I shamed you, master,” he said in Japanese.

“No,” Izuki replied in their home dialect. “That is not your real voice.”

He cringed, eyes falling, but complied and said, “I shamed you that day.”

“Are you implying your *Herzkind* also shamed me when they accosted Aomine Daiki and lost?”

While he sensed no accusation, Kuroko could not stop himself from ducking his head.

“Surviving the confrontation is my shame. In death, my *Herzkind* were venerated as warriors. But I…” He hesitated. “I failed. Blinded by arrogance and misguided by some valiant notion of heroism. I failed to avenge them. My incarceration,”—he looked up—“is my greatest embarrassment because for all that you had labored to teach me, I disregarded your wisdom, supplanting my own naive perception of justice, and, in doing so, defamed you.”
“When Imayoshi refused to expatriate your body, I wrestled with the unknown. Had your corpse been maimed unrecognizable? Were you claimed as a barbaric trophy by your killer? Or had you survived the encounter as a prisoner?” Izuki paused. “Believe it or not, when Aomine’s contract was updated after your disappearance to include the report of a “shadow” accompanying him, I was overwhelmed with relief. Past ambiguities became clear. You survived.” A warm smile creased his eyes. “Even if it took me sprouting a few gray hairs and descending into the twilight years of my life, it meant one day we would be brought together again.”

Kuroko’s mouth twitched to form a timid smile that he quickly restrained.

“As the years passed,” Izuki continued, “and more of our compatriots fell to that man, I had to wonder the conditions Imayoshi must have kept you in. The measures of torment delivered to break your psyche and hollow your heart. To sit helplessly here in this castle on the declaration of deceased, body unrecoverable filled me with immeasurable hatred and frustration. I believed you were alive and would—no, could—escape your minders to send an emergency message.” Izuki gnawed his lip, interlocked fingers tensing. “But you didn’t. Not once in thirty-four years.”

Kuroko stared into his lap. At his bandaged fingers. Tears that had not yet dried attracted the chill of the room’s cool air.

“Four day they spent trying to break me,” he said. “Shackled up in an underground cell. Shrouded in darkness. Conventional methods limited so that I could not circumvent their domination of me. I eluded electrocution, braising, and branding.” Light sources powerful enough to cast bold shadows could provide a vehicle for escape or weapon to defend himself against his captors.

“By the second day,” he carried on, “I had determined they sought to learn nothing from me. Their pleasure derived solely from seeing me bleed. Watching bruises bloom. Stressing joints to blanche without breakage. Testing how long they could extract agony before I blacked out and ceasing their ministrations before I could. That day, I lured a guard close, bit into his carotid, and broke from confinement. I plowed through the hunter’s headquarters and standing between me and freedom was Aomine-kun.” Nostalgia tugged at the corners of his mouth. “A blur, for all of a second, as I charged past. Next I knew, his arms had locked around me and I was dangling like an unruly child.”

He chuckled. “Three times I had stabbed him with bone cutters I had stolen from the cell. For all my thrashing and biting, an enemy in a foreign land who nearly killed him, do you know what he said to me?”

Izuki said nothing.

“He said, ‘Calm down. You’re okay. I’ve got you.’”

Silence.

“Aomine-kun had no idea what was going on in that cellar. What his own men had been ordered, by Imayoshi, to do to me. On the fourth day, I was brought before them both. Imayoshi declared that, for time indeterminable, I was to service Aomine-kun as a protector. To be his ‘shadow.’ My only other option was a four-by-four foot concrete box. No daylight. One meal a week. Drip fed water. Until I disintegrated.” He paused. “The single word that launched my servitude was all I spoke for many years. Once I had, I knew there would be no returning to Bokoku. Or you.”

Izuki’s gaze, that had not faltered, flickered with stern paternal disappointment. “You thought that if you sent out a distress signal or revealed yourself to any of the assassins who later came for him that I would utilize every resource at my disposal to bring you home. Even if it meant killing
Aomine.”

Kuroko cringed.

“I despised him for many years for what I perceived he may have done to you. I often fantasized infiltrating the temple, cutting Imai’s men down, and pulling you out of that hell. As the head of a clandestine agency of contract killers, however, I had to struggle to tame that urge. Persuade myself to believe that I was competent and thorough in your training. That you were strong enough to overcome such adversity without my help.” Izuki nodded toward Kuroko’s hands. “And you have.”

Reflexively, Kuroko tucked the bandages out of sight.

“We were there that night,” he said. “In Kagami-kun’s home.”

Without hesitation, Izuki proclaimed, “I don’t regret what I said. Or that he heard it.”

“I’m not seeking an apology. That night, the hurt and disdain in your voice reminded me of the compromising position I had placed myself in. I could not correspond with you. Not because of my capture.” He held Izuki’s stare. “I realized I could not choose between you and Aomine-kun. Continuing radio silence to stay by his side would appease him. But if I reached out to you, I dreaded you would seek to claim his life in retribution for what he had done in years past.” His throat tightened with fears long suppressed. “Call me foolish or naive. Insist that he manipulated me into pitying him.”

The bulkheads of his emotional walls were weakening. Pressure pulsed in his skull, flooding his nose, and his vision watered.

He dabbed his eyes, sniffed, and looking pointedly at Izuki, said, “He’s Herzkind to me.” Tears ruptured and he dropped his chin to his chest. “I’m so sorry, baba.”

Izuki threw his arms around Kuroko and pulled him close. “No more, Tupfen.”

Lean arms compressed his shoulders in a tight embrace. The woody smell of birch and pine enveloped his senses.

“Don’t you dare apologize for that.”

Izuki’s wobbling voice plucked at Kuroko’s heart. Winding his arms around the spymaster, he pressed into the older man’s chest.

“I could not be more grateful that you’ve come back to me, Tetsuya.”

“There was nothing I wanted more than for you to know I was alive.” Warm tears spilled. “I need you to know that.”

“I believe you.”

Kuroko pulled back. Izuki’s hold slackened but did not disappear. “I knew how you felt about Aomine-kun and once we had bonded, the thought of contacting you, knowing I had to reveal my relationship with him… I didn’t want to disappoint you. For you to be ashamed of my dissidence.”

Izuki’s hands slid to cradle his face. Calloused thumbs swiped away lingering tears.

“I could never be ashamed of you. Tetsuya, you saw the light in someone the world reviled as evil.
You opened your wounded heart to him and he healed you. He revived a part of you that I worried died a long time ago.” The spymaster’s eyes glistened as a broad smile parted his lips. “You risked your life to save an innocent man.”

Izuki gently thumbed his brow. His eyes slid closed as butterflies exploded in his stomach, expanding warmth through him. An altogether different sensation from the affectionate touches of Aomine and Momoi. Strange, he thought, how gestures of adoration could generate such distinct impressions of love.

He met the elder shadow’s gaze. Tears reddened his pinched eyes, brow furrowed, and mouth pursed in controlled elation.

“I could not be more proud of who you have become.”

Then, leaning forward and pressing a few firm kisses along his brow, Izuki embraced Kuroko again.

He sunk into the hold, arms winding tighter around Izuki’s back.

And he unclenched the reins, allowing his bottled emotions to slip away, stampeding over the uncertainty and self-deprecation that had kept his happiness anchored down for decades.

“Thank you, baba.”

Chapter End Notes

Points of Clarification

*Language of the Shadow--Kuroko and Izuki speak in the home dialect of Selene. From their birth until around the time of the Holy Land Crusades (early 1000s), the Shadow nation spoke Turkic strains. Thereafter the Shadow had distended an empire from Iraq to Turkey to France and the Baltic states and the northern settlements began to incorporate Germanic language into their culture. As the Lightning decimated the Shadow, Apparitions from the southern reaches migrated north and brought their language with them, creating a hybrid dialect still spoken in Selene.

*Herzkind--As explained by Kuroko, it is a serious term of endearment meant for anyone the speaker deems precious to themselves. Essentially in English, it corresponds with blood brother. The word itself is a manipulation of the German words herz "heart" and kind "a group of people or things having similar characteristics."

*Tupfen--German for speckle or dab and a term of endearment from a senior parental or guardian figure to someone younger, usually that they have raised. Synonymous with English nicknames like sweetie, honey, etc. Among Shadow Apparitions it is meant to convey a tiny, opaque shadow.

*Multilingual--Evidently in this chapter you may notice that Izuki asks Kuroko to speak in their Germano-Turkic language rather than Japanese, which Kuroko has been speaking throughout Trust Without Cynicism is Hollow. As stated in one of the earlier chapters, Shadow assassins of grade-B and higher are taught languages of nations they will be operating in. Kuroko's adaption of Japanese was a necessity for his work in
Bokoku where Japanese is a prominent language in the country. Fluently, Kuroko can speak Japanese, German, the hybrid Selene dialect of Germano-Turkic, and has a moderate grasp of Mandarin. Izuki’s repertoire, as spymaster, is far more extensive.

*Baba--Turkish for *daddy* or *papa*. 
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

“There is one thing I can assure you of.” Akashi said.

He waited.

“Your ex-wife, Momoi Satsuki, is safely in my custody.”

Finally, he thought, something went right.

Chapter Notes

Part two to tonight’s update. Not much to say here except that I almost chopped this one in half for the length. Because I had to tweak this one around for the sake of preserving chronology, I will include a tidbit at the end to clear up the present time line.

Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aomine, Kagami, and Akashi arrived in Hirosawa, the train ride overall uneventful. Their transport had not been inconvenienced by other passengers, thanks to the Lord’s clout affording their private cars the protection of a few borrowed grade-As from Zhestokiy. At Akashi’s insistence, Aomine’s burn was inspected and Kagami’s sprained knee pacified with a compression wrap. He hadn’t liked that his injury was exposed to the Fire brothers when they had been allowed to retreat behind closed doors. He’d also been incensed when the physician scolded the mistreatment dealt to the wound, predicting recovery had been set back another week. Declaring the scarring would not heal cleanly only further aggravated him. At the time he’d thought it peculiar Kagami sought privacy over minor sprains and scrapes then recalled how the prince deferred undressing in front of him in Kise’s tent.

Leaving him to conclude Kagami was a prude.

For much of the journey, he sat alone, sleep and appetite virtually absent under the ceaseless surveillance of his minders. Once he had contemplated shifting to another car. The likelihood that Kagami would follow or Akashi would interject discouraged the attempt. Even after Akashi had withdrawn behind the closed doors of the isolated compartment for treatment for the better part of two hours.

The wrap up at Casimir had plagued his thoughts, keeping him wide-eyed and anxious while the watchdogs carried on absentmindedly. What were the conditions the Lord negotiated to acquire his release? Why the designation of asset? He found it difficult to imagine what that could entail given he had nothing of value to offer Akashi in exchange. Clearly the tag was a euphemism for what the shrimp could not or would not say in front of his brother. Blame for Hyuuga’s murder
remained an unproven case of mistaken identity. Sure, he was guilty of killing forty-eight of Akashi’s elite assassins and even more from chapters in Zhestokiy and Selene. The outcome of which he could only suspect would be convoluted once brought before a judge.

In the courtyard, Akashi had promised to expound upon his conference with interim Kaizer Hayakawa. Two and a half days they spent confined to a train car and still he knew nothing.

Secretary Furihata Kouki and a team of grade-B assassins intercepted them at the train station adjoining the Fire capital and guided them on a forty-five minute trek to the castle. Akashi had spent the majority of the jaunt conversing with the secretary, taking turns volleying orders and presenting updates. None of which Aomine had attended to at the time.

As they approached the castle, he’d wished he had.

The inclined pathway winding to connect the lower courtyard fronting the iconic towering façade of the only Japanese-Gothic castle in Asia to the inner courtyard was overrun by a throng of protestors swaying like tall grass. Military police lined the balustrade, barricading violent lashing hands from spearing through. As they reached the gate, Apparitions hanging over the rooftop of the curtain wall lobbed slurs, profanities, rocks, shoes, bottles, and other projectiles that the grade-Bs were forced to deflect. More officers cleaved a path through the madness to the castle. Another contingent of Shadow Apparitions materialized from the mob flooding the inner courtyard and hustled to fortify their convoy.

Ensconced in a pack of killers, plunging headfirst into the chaos, hate speech rang loud. Indignities, defamation, racial epithets—while not applicable to him anymore, given his awakening — shocked him.

Kagami must have sensed his heightened discomfort. He’d drawn an arm around Aomine and his quickened pace urged the detail on. Within a few heart-stopping moments of apprehension the whoosh of the castle doors sealed them safely inside. Cries of outrage and contempt penetrated four inches of mahogany. Tremors racked Aomine’s muscles, weakening his knees as realization sunk his gut.

Akashi had paraded a globally-recognized criminal through a horde of radical and violent objectors with minimal protection.

Was he insane? Was he challenging his countrymen to exercise temperance? Or was he trying to intimidate Aomine to ensure cooperation? Tension had eluded the assassins during the drama but the pointed glare Kagami was drilling into his brother’s temple, behind the safety of closed doors, and the astonishment blanching Furihata’s face said it all.

It was a power play.

And Akashi had briefed no one save his officers.

He was insane.

All but two of the assassins were dismissed. Akashi and the secretary departed up an ascending stairwell. Kagami’s lips pursed an angry line as the men led them deeper inside. Aomine marched in tow, paranoia nipping after his every step. As they threaded the halls, he thought back to the Lord’s charming assurance that he was no prisoner.

Well, he sure as hell felt like one.

They climbed a squatty flight of stairs and stopped at a door. One of a series running either wall,
spaced at intervals suggesting the presence of apartments. The assassins flanked the portal and one opened the room without reception.

Aomine did not enter and tossed his head to the door.

“What the hell is this,” he asked Kagami.

“Until Akashi finalizes all his angles, this is where you’ll stay.”

“Was that dog and pony bullshit he just pulled one of his angles?”

“If it was, he obviously didn’t share his plan with the rest of the group.”

“I saw the look on your face,” Aomine said, jabbing an accusatory finger. “We both know it was.”

“And he may very well have orchestrated that, too. Point is, pissing and moaning about someone who isn’t here to someone who can’t do anything about it isn’t helping.”

Aomine sighed hard through his nose and shook his head.

He motioned to the sentinels. “Get rid of them. I don’t need babysitters.”

“Not your call. The guard dogs stay.”

He scoffed. “So, what, I’m your lady-in-waiting, your majesty?”

Unexpectedly, Kagami laughed. “First off, as heirs, we’re equal in rank. Second,”—he pointed—“those bony shoulders does not a flattering dress make. And third, and most importantly, you are not a prisoner. So, relax.”

Aomine groaned, peering into the sunlit room. Neither guardian acknowledged him.

Which he appreciated.

“Just sit tight until I come for you. Read a book or something.”

Aomine lay on the bed, one arm tucked under his head. A book, neglected pages face up, bowed over his belly. Sunlight pierced the room with the golden glow of late afternoon. Patchy clouds strolled high beyond the panes, the shears drawn back. It had been raining when he awoke from his nap about five hours ago to a room just as vacant of energy and life as it had been when Kagami herded him inside yesterday.

Three days had passed since Imayoshi’s arrest and he still knew clueless.

The only faces he had seen since were those of the silent duo when they cracked the door to deliver meals. An attached bathroom and his increased notoriety within the capital meant no sojourns to stretch his legs, either. The room, albeit fully furnished, possessed little entertainment to nullify his boredom. A modest corner bookshelf held around three dozen titles to skim. Only a handful teased enough interest to browse. Eventually he had chosen a century-old journal on the usage of snow leopards by the Fire in the 1700s that, while informative and somewhat interesting, could not engage his focus.

His fingers drummed the waxy pages, gaze absently tracing the coffered ceiling. Thoughts of Goryokaku trickled back. And Tetsu. Kagami’s efforts to redirect his pessimism toward a more
hopeful outlook did not last long. He knew Imayoshi, not as a sly fox, but a coiled viper. Vulnerable to the larger predators surrounding him but always hiding unseen with a potent and necrotic bite. Tetsu had studied his adversary well over the years. Yet even with his refined perception, he’d read the snake wrong. Lured into the beast’s den and ambushed.

It was that damned collar.

Grief pricked his eyes. Why didn’t he just destroy the wretched contraption? At least if he had, Tetsu would have stood a chance against the Dan and his minion.

But he didn’t.

Because he couldn’t bring himself to defy Imayoshi.

And now Tetsu was gone.

Pressure ballooned in his skull, eyes, and throat. Tears probed for release.

Two swift knocks startled him, jostling him from melancholy.

He hesitated, attention on the door.

Again, two knocks.

“Aomine.”

Irritation shot through him. About damn time.

He rolled from the bed, careful not to crunch his waist, and rubbed away all trace of conflict from his face.

He cracked the door.

Kagami filled the gap.

“Can I help you, warden?” he asked.

“Don’t be shitty.”

“Cram the indignance. Is this your idea of payback for leaving you alone with Nigou?”

Puzzlement screwed Kagami’s face.

“The dog.”

For a moment it appeared Kagami would retort. Then thought better of it and shook the idea away. “My involvement in lobbying for you ended when we boarded the train. Akashi hasn’t contacted me either. So, you’re not the only one who’s been bumming around with questions and no answers.” He paused and stepped back. “Until now.”

The prince turned, jerking his head. “Let’s go.”

Aomine slipped into the hall, easing the door shut. The sentinels did not budge. Hands folded in front of them, chins up, eyes vacant but watchful.

He did not flash them a parting gesture or second glance and followed Kagami.
Kagami depressed the latch without the courtesy of a knock. The office’s double doors rose at the end of an aisle of desks seating little more than a dozen Apparitions busied with stacks of paperwork, nose-deep in journals, ledgers, and binders, and immersed in conversation over telephones. Not technological enough to suggest these were intelligence agents. Akashi was too suspicious and forward-thinking to position his most critical artery in such an open and easily-accessible location. Must have been the pipsqueak’s secretariat.

Aomine stepped in behind Kagami.

Akashi sat at his desk, hunched in hushed conference. Stooping over the opposite side was Furihata. The Lord cut them a glance. The secretary straightened, regarding them with a face pinched by either agitation or disappointment. Aomine couldn’t tell. He supposed either reaction was to be expected the closer and more personally one worked with Akashi Seijuurou. If his own brother’s constant scowling were any indication.

“Please, come in, Taiga.”

Kagami did not react to the Lord’s stale, monotonous sarcasm. “You called me.”

Akashi brought steepled fingers to his lips and refocused on his secretary. A moment passed. Then Furihata collected a bundle of folders from the desk.

“Just page me when you’re ready,” he said through clenched teeth.

Akashi grunted understanding. Aomine sidestepped as the little man stalked past and jerked the door closed. The abrupt exit did not appear to bother the Fire brothers.

“It’s a miracle your bullshit hasn’t driven him to quit already,” Kagami said.

Silence was Akashi’s response.

Kagami occupied one of the two plush chairs fronting the desk. Aomine dropped into the other.

After a tense moment, the Lord drew back, woven fingers falling over his stomach.

“I trust my associates did not present a problem,” he said to Aomine.

“To be a problem, they would have had to confront me. Which they didn’t. They just stood imposingly outside the door, saying nothing. Which you didn’t.”

“As I’m certain Taiga told you, I was finishing negotiations. Placing you in that room was more than just a countermeasure to safeguard you from the radicals who believe you deserve far less charity than I have granted you. It was also to provide me time to sort out and solve this mess you two made.”

Kagami scoffed. “How the hell is any of this my fault?”

Aomine leapt in. “Pick one from an infinite number of things that have gone wrong in the last two weeks.”
“You are not exempt from blame.” Akashi’s authoritarian tone cut deep. “In all the occurrences you fault Taiga for, you were also involved.”

He suppressed the electric needles prickling beneath his skin.

Kagami said nothing, also seeming to temper a retort.

“The most grievous of which was the hot point of debate between Hayakawa-san and I at Casimir. For the time spent waiting for him and I to come to an agreement, I extend a sincere apology to you both. Although he is a competent man, albeit eccentric to the point of dysfunction, he is also a devout zealot. Much like his predecessor. They disagreed on a great many things but they were both ardent patriots of Zhestokiy. Losing his mentor was a serious slight and not to apprehend you a grave injustice.”

“Is the palace coroner an ardent patriot, too?” Aomine asked. “Or did the examination of the Kaizer’s corpse unveil that the stab wound to his chest is larger than my blade could inflict?”

“There was no official exam conducted by palace coroners.”

Kagami barked, “Why the hell not?”

“Now you’re indignant,” Aomine scoffed. “Where was this suspicion before you chased me through the damn fort crying wolf?”

Kagami glared at him, face red and pulsing with a warning glow. “I walk in on you slathered in blood standing over a corpse with a weapon in your hand. What the fuck was I supposed to think?”

“That’s just it. You didn’t think,” he yelled. “You jumped to conclusions and because of you, here I am.”

Akashi interjected. “If that comes as no surprise to you.” He paused, reeling Aomine and Kagami’s attention.

Something that had gone unspoken rankled Kagami and he shook his head.

“I didn’t sign up for the two-pronged character assassination pitchfork up my ass today.” He started to rise from the chair.

“Sit.”

Kagami hesitated, fingers tight around the armrests, half lifted from the seat.

“I warned you not to go after Aomine.”

“You commanded,” Kagami countered.

“And you disobeyed me.”

Challenge escalated Kagami’s tone. “You have no jurisdiction over me anymore.”

“When you undergo an unsanctioned operation in enemy territory and assault a foreign dignitary, that flimsy contract goes out the window. In case you forgot how the chain of authority works outside the smithing village, you may dictate Izuki’s actions but I overrule you both when matters of national security are concerned.”

Kagami did not budge.
“Imayoshi considered your offense against Aomine a declaration of war.”

Rebellion faded from Kagami’s tense muscles and he slowly sunk into the cushion.

“You disclosed it,” he muttered. “At the conference. That’s why you ejected us.”

Confusion folded Aomine’s brow. It wasn’t because of the fight?

“I don’t see that you left me much choice,” Akashi said.

Kagami sighed, fingers sliding around his neck, pinching and kneading the flesh. He bobbed his head in concession.

“As I was saying,” the Lord continued. “Hayakawa-san blocked the coroners from performing a necropsy. Predictably so.”

“So, I’ll be going down in history as the one who assassinated Hyuuga, with no concrete evidence save for one witness with a loud mouth?”

“You weren’t listening.”

The knowing lilt to the Lord’s voice was provocative. Aomine thought back. Before the brother’s bickering episode.

*There was no official exam conducted by palace coroners.*

He understood. “One of your people?”

Akashi smiled. “The best. Not his desired denomination as he prefers to work with the living. But a genius with a scalpel at any rate. His appetite for accuracy and truth is voracious.”

He wondered about the mystery man but shelved the inquiry for later.

“I am in possession of the report. While I cannot clear your name immediately or cure Zhestokiy’s interpretation of your character, know that your innocence has been confirmed. Until I can present it before a judge, I’m afraid you’ll have to encumber the stigma of a king killer.”

“What would you be interested in cleansing my guilt? Aren’t you sore from losing Hyuuga?”

“In my own way,” Akashi said. “He was a friend to me, regardless of the roles we played sitting at opposite ends of the conference table.”

The Lord’s gaze flicked to the desktop, as though considering something. A cryptic seriousness masked his face, sharpening his eyes.

“I knew too late that Imayoshi had trained the crosshairs on Hyuuga,” he said, attention locking on Aomine. “You would become his scapegoat to get from me at the fort what he failed to acquire at the summit. Contrary to Imayoshi’s instruction I knew you would not kill Hyuuga. Susa Yoshinori, on the other hand, was far more willing and capable.”

“He was at Casimir,” Kagami chimed in, his posture in the chair slackened, seeming to have calmed. “I recognized the daggers in your arm and leg.”

Aomine had, too. Before he could voice his assertion, Akashi confirmed it with a nod.

“Now he’s in the wind. Provided a last ditch distraction by Imayoshi that afforded him a quick
escape.”

He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. That bastard was still on the loose.

“Fantastic,” he grunted.

Akashi, however, appeared unbothered by the problem. “Don’t be so glum. He’ll be dealt with.”

“By?” Kagami asked.

Aomine shared the prince’s skepticism.

“Selene is running point on a manhunt. Our dearly deranged ghoul’s treachery struck a nerve and so our once-pacifistic friends are now hackles up and teeth bore on the offensive. I extended my resources to assist their efforts but thus far have not been accepted or even acknowledged.”

“Not sure Izuki would be flattered to be labeled a resource.”

Aomine leaned forward. “They’re chasing a ghost. He’s discreetly worked alongside Imayoshi for more than a century without being discovered. How are they planning to catch him?”

“While I appreciate your concern, we’ve drifted off topic.” Akashi shifted to sit straight. “I’ve finalized deliberations with Wakamatsu-san and completed release procedures for safe passage back to Nice. Effective at sundown today. Once you return, expect to be debriefed of all that he and I discussed. Including the consequences of your newly-awakened identity.”

Aomine wished he could feign surprise. In the event the incumbent Dan became incapacitated and could no longer hold office, the directors launched an emergency election amongst themselves to nominate an interim replacement to hold station for up to a year. With him and Satsuki absent, four remained to cast a ballot. Knowing her sex would eliminate her chances, a sad discrimination of their democratic practices, Araki wouldn’t hesitate to vote for herself if but to spite her competitors. With all the friction Wakamatsu generated with his brash and boisterous personality, his ideologies paralleled the course Imayoshi had upheld to steer the country and upsetting continuity during such a fragile time could spark public resistance. As passionately as Wakamatsu coveted the mantle of sovereignty he would find nothing enjoyable about cleaning up Aomine’s messes.

Their imminent meeting would not be pleasant.

“Hold on, consequences? Are you implying that my nature will hinder my return home?”

“Not your return but definitely your citizenship.”

A terrifying reality seeped in. “They’re going to banish me?”

Akashi said nothing, face stoic.

He slammed a fist on the cushioned armrest, voice fed by angry panic, “I’m a lawful citizen of Jia.”

“Only if you were born within the country’s border. Which, as we both know, you were not.”

Anxiety palpitated his heart and his chest hollowed. “So, Wakamatsu’s just gonna expatriate me to Zhestokiy because I light up during a thunderstorm?”

“I assure you I don’t know what the interim Dan intends.”
Aomine ground his shoulders into the backrest, covering his mouth. The fingers of his other hand drummed an impatient beat on the armrest.

He couldn’t believe this. His life in Jia was over? Just like that?

Akashi’s dulcet voice stroked his ears. “There is one thing I can assure you of.”

He forced composure, uncovering his face, and jerked his head.

“Your ex-wife, Momoi Satsuki, is safely in my custody.”

Relief chased away the panic and thawed the tension straining his muscles.

*Finally,* he thought, *something went right.*

“Where is she?” He couldn’t care less how childishly exuberant he sounded. “I need to see her.”

Akashi, however, minded and in his trademark monotone said, “She is under the supervision of my spymaster in a secure location.”

“Did you not hear me, short stack?”

Irritation claimed the Lord’s face. “She will be released when our business is concluded and no sooner. I would think considering the lengths Taiga and I have gone to despite how gravely you have wrong, bereaved, and inconvenienced us both, the least you could do is recognize your place in this situation and lower your prideful head.”

The biting words, spoken calmly, brandished an obvious threat. Now he understood the pertinence of *asset.* He was wrong before. He possessed the invaluable exchange of indentured gratitude and unquestioning cooperation.

Though he did not bend, he lowered his gaze. Side-eyeing Kagami revealed, by either experience or instinct, he had also turned his heated gaze downward.

Akashi motioned to the windows rising on the wall opposite the door. “I invite you to look outside.”

Aomine pushed himself from the chair and strode to the first window.

“Beyond the gate, into the plaza.”

He peered through the panes. Four stories down, beyond the flaring rooflines of a wide-mouth, bulky gate opened an enormous, pitted terraced plaza. Positioned in a half circle on the second level landing were a collection of wooden structures. Squinting clarified their tall square shapes and recognition struck him.

He glanced back at Akashi. “Funeral pyres.”

The Lord’s head dipped in affirmation.

He had also counted. “There are five.”

Kagami skated to the same window, the sill wide enough to accommodate them both.

Again he stared out at the pyres. Fire Apparitions utilized cremation to handle the remains of their dead. Each Apparition expired eventually and while their overall biology was similar, their
decomposition was not. When Fire Apparitions died, the flesh would gradually expel fluids, dehydrating the corpse into a husk that would then disintegrate into ash. Ancient practitioners of the mortuary arts considered such degradation a disgrace and instituted the pyre to complete the deceased’s life cycle. Beginning life in fire and ending in embers accompanying a magnificent final blaze. The receptacle itself was crafted from expertly seasoned cherry wood imported from Hi-Sokoku, providing a long-lasting burn and emanating a fragrant aroma.

The ultimate return to nature.

Definitely more poetic than the Ice’s more staunch rituals.

When he’d noticed the number of stacks, he could only assume they stood for one thing.

“Those men your spymaster lost. Tetsu’s fictive kin. Is that what those are intended for?”

Kagami cut him a side glance but said nothing.

He recalled, in the prince’s house, as he and Tetsu eavesdropped in the adjoining room, the spymaster spilling his guts about the assassins Aomine had taken away from him.

Men that had been like sons to Izuki Shun.

Brothers to Tetsu.

And, apparently, something just as precious to Kagami.

*We both lost something to that man.*

“They are not.”

Aomine and Kagami whirled.

“Aomine Daichi, age seventy-nine. Imayoshi Nori, age seventy-two. And three newborn hybrid children. The first, one week old. The next, four days. The last, only three.”

Heterochromatic eyes lifted, earnest and commiserate. “I cannot begin to imagine, nor would I dare, what you experienced too early in your youth to be denied fatherhood. Contrary to our positions as contenders on the checkerboard of politics, I feel there is no greater offering I could make in light of the events that have now become clear.”

Breath stilled in Aomine’s chest. Blood pulsed loudly in his ears.

“Aomine,” Akashi continued. “I am sincerely sorry for the grievous loss of life you have suffered.”

He couldn’t bring himself to respond. Body, mouth, brain. All struck numb, his senses paralyzed. He wasn’t sure what bothered him more. Akashi Seijuurou being intimately apprised of the most heartaching and sensitive moments of his life or that the Lord sectioned out personal time and resources to construct pyres to honor the cherished ones Aomine had lost.

Strangers. Unknown to him but for the final confession of a depraved monster erasing the tracks of his sin.

Akashi’s voice eased over the white noise clawing inside his skull. “I understand if you do not want to accept our funerary custom—”

“No,” he blurted.
He calmed himself and continued to say, “Satsuki endured the pain of illegally cremating our children before. Hiding her agony from me. Blaming herself for their deaths to make sense of how three newborn children could just… die. I wanted to understand why she did it. But I never could. Her selfishness at the time denied me the opportunity to attain closure. To puzzle out the mystery on my own. Instead, I’ve spent the past fifty years attributing their premature fates to my genetic shortcomings as a defective Apparition.”

He bit his lip, stopping himself from exposing much more than he already had.

Gaze level with Akashi’s, he made clear, “I want her with me when they burn.”

The Lord nodded then looked at Kagami. “Taiga, would you fetch Momoi-san?”

Kagami hesitated, shooting appraising glances between him and Akashi then crossed to the door. He balked as he threw one of the slabs open.

“You?”

His incredulity piqued Aomine’s interest toward the portal.

From his desk, Akashi said, “Let him enter, Taiga. I’ve been expecting him.”

Kagami stepped aside and Sakurai Ryou shuffled inside. The secretary swept a bow to all in the room.

Then set his sights on Aomine. Something in the little man’s face plucked at his insecurity and he fought not to withdraw into himself. Sympathy glossed Sakurai’s bright, round eyes creased with the parental endearment of a lost bond re-forged.

Again Kagami’s words from the forest resurfaced. *Says he delivered and cared for you as a baby.*

Questions mounted but his tongue thickened and no words came.

The door sealed softly as Kagami left.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Sakurai said to him.

Still nothing.

“If my behavior at the fort, or even at the summit, was inappropriate or bothersome, I sincerely apologize.”

He lifted calming hands. “It’s not that.”

Sakurai’s lips quivered into a smile. “I’m so sorry for all that you’ve had to endure, Aomine-sa—I mean, Dai—No, I mean…” he palmed his face. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to address you now,” he sniffed, emotion robbing him of coherency. “Professionally, it had to be Aomine-san, but —”

“For you, Aomine-san was my father.”

The secretary’s head, concealed beneath a curtain of tented fingers, bobbed. As Sakurai fought to tame his tears, Aomine reflected back to the palace courtyard. To Imayoshi’s account of what transpired that night one hundred years ago. He was only a month old when he was abducted. Sakurai was serving as his mother’s midwife, having helped raise him. Imayoshi made no mention or implication in his narration of a third person inhabiting the farmhouse. Nor did they check for
one.

Because his birth had been a secret. And so, too, was Sakurai’s involvement.

The grief-stricken hunch and overflowing anguish made sense.

His words came soft and cautious. “You were there, weren’t you? When my parents were killed.”

Sakurai shrank, eyes pinched shut. Tears spilled down fingers bridged over his nose.

“They didn’t know you were there. Listening.”

Sakurai lifted his head, hands falling away. “I was sleeping in the den. Nori-san assured me I could take a few hours rest. I later awoke to loud voices coming from your nursery. When I sat up, I saw him there, crouching outside the door cracked just enough for him to hear the goings-on inside. I couldn’t bring myself to confront that monster.”

Akashi sat silent, observing.

“You didn’t want them to kill you.” He paused. “Or me.”

“My silence cost your parents and an innocent woman their lives. Now my confession has scarified another.”

From his desk, Akashi said, “Enough, Ryou.”

Sakurai wiped his eyes.

Aomine pinned Akashi with suspicion. “What does he mean?”

“That day, at the summit—”

“No,” Akashi barked.

Sakurai flinched. “He must know.”

Aomine glared at the Lord. “Why shouldn’t I?

Akashi did not react to the challenge. “Because I don’t expect you to understand.”

Hackles erupted and Aomine stomped a step forward.

“This is my life,” he yelled. “I’m sick of everyone else dictating what I can or can’t handle. What I need to know or what is privileged information. You’re not exercising discretion for any other reason than to save your own ass because even you realize that to anyone else whatever you did was unjustified.”

Steepled fingers shielded Akashi’s lips as he sighed. He nodded to Sakurai.

“That day at the summit,” Sakurai continued, eyes downcast, “Imayoshi intimated intent to trigger a conflict, using the altercation between you and Kagami-san as the catalyst. When that did not work and he rebuffed Akashi-san’s threat, I knew what his true aim was. At the castle, while in conference with Hyuuga-san, I divulged the incident in 1906. He was now their target. Akashi-san was then summoned and apprised of the situation.”

He stared hard into the Lord’s heterochromatic eyes.
Akashi leaned back, interlocked hands falling. “I thereafter concocted a plan using Junpei as bait to confirm our suspicions about Imayoshi. The result of which precipitated events long laid into place by the Dan.”

He wished that surprised him. Instead anger festered.

“So, you set up your own partner. Like a pig to slaughter.”

Akashi’s brow furrowed at the repulsive tone. “Junpei offered himself. He believed he could handle whomever the Dan sent, knowing the man himself would not act. We both expected your arrival at the fort. What we did not anticipate was an undertaker. One who knew Junpei intimately enough to precisely blindside him.”

“Sakurai told you both that Susa was present when my parents were murdered. That man is an accomplished killer, embedded in the farthest-reaching information network and head of security technologies encompassing half the Apparition World, and you expect me to believe neither of you predicted Imayoshi would sic him on the Kaizer?”

“I don’t care what you think,” Akashi said. “I’m telling you what I know and what I know is that Kaizer Hyuuga Junpei was unafraid to meet his end if it meant uncovering the truth.”

Aomine recalled the brief discourse at the fort. Through a crack in the door.

In English, between killer and victim. Words he could never reproduce on his own.

“Think what you will of my methods,” Akashi continued. “But you are far too underqualified to even think of lecturing me about the duality of moral principles and political gambling associated with ruling an empire.”

Static coiling around Aomine intensified and he marched to the desk.

His palms slapped the tabletop. “You expect me to forgive you for what you’ve done?”

“A thank you will suffice.”

Rage infused his muscles and he lurched.

Sakurai sprang and clutched his arm in a tight embrace. Aomine teetered.

Akashi did not recoil.

Sakurai eased himself between Aomine and the Lord. “Please don’t. Lord Akashi is not at fault.”

Anger ebbed, weakening the vibrant pulsing light swarming Aomine to crawling flickers.

He glared. “How can you say that after what he just said?”

Sakurai’s grip hardened. “I was there. He speaks the truth. Hyuuga-san knew what destiny awaited him at the fort.” Tremors racked the little man’s fingers. “You tried to save him, didn’t you?”

He said nothing, looking sideways at Akashi.

“When we collided in the hallway, you were covered in his blood.”

His gaze again bore into Sakurai. “You told Akashi I killed him.”
Distress warped Sakurai’s face. “No.”

Aomine yanked free. “I heard Kagami tell you to inform him”—he jabbed a finger at Akashi—“that I murdered Hyuuga.”

“That may be what he ordered of me but that is not what I reported.”

He couldn’t bring himself to argue.

“I’m not asking you to forgive his deception or accept his heinous actions as righteous. I only ask that you understand that because of him, you are here, alive, and Imayoshi is in prison where he can no longer pollute you.”

He searched the secretary’s earnest eyes. After all that had happened, he wasn’t certain that he could untangle himself from the grief, anger, and confusion that eroded a gaping hole of emptiness inside him. Despite Sakurai’s assurances, the Lord was withholding far more of his involvement than felt necessary to disclose. Making Akashi too untrustworthy.

He knew contesting the bastard on his home turf would be a mistake. His position as an asset could quickly be commuted to prisoner. All of the countermeasures painstakingly executed voided by a single hapless misstep. Submitting to Akashi rankled him. But he was tired.

And as demeaning as it was to be indebted to the puny prick, the tyrant held his life in his hands.

He sighed. Tension seizing his muscles exhausted and the spindly bands of light vanished.

He regarded Akashi. “Where do we go from here? What was the point of bringing him?” To Sakurai, he mumbled, “No offense.”

“He claims to have something for you. I’m told it’s a parting gift of sorts.”

Sakurai produced a packet envelope and offered it.

Aomine accepted, asking, “Who from?”

He scanned for a sender or address. Finding no markings on the front, he flipped to the backside. Centered on the flap was a line of remarkably pristine calligraphy.

我が息子大輝

Shock reverberated through him.

Our son, Daiki.

He motioned with the envelope. “Is this—”

Sakurai nodded, a faint smile tugging his lips. “Letters from your parents to you. Written after you were born, Aomi—I mean, your father—entrusted them to me to release at my discretion. Now is that time.”

His eyes traced the kanji again.

“Thank you, Ryou,” Akashi said from his desk. “Assuming your business is finished, there are agents waiting to escort him to the library. There he can see just what his parents had to say.”

Akashi reached for a stack of portfolios.
He started for the door.

“May I accompany him?” Sakurai asked.

Aomine peered back.

“I have no objections.” The Lord did not halt his task, pen tip tracing lines in a portfolio opened before him. “However, understand the escort stands.”

Sakurai bowed then scuttled to the door. As Aomine followed him through the threshold, Akashi’s voice stopped him.

“One thing, Daiki.”

He waited, not looking back.

“With all the conviction Imayoshi expressed as he exposed his crime, not once did you strike him in retaliation. He brazenly confirmed every suspicion you held against him. So, why?”

Aomine wondered, too. Every word from his uncle’s mouth agitated the emotions stewing inside him into a violent swarm. White noise had erupted in his brain, scattering his concentration, and seducing the light to overtake him. Pressure bloating beneath his skin, stinging and probing, threatening to rupture. Until all he could do was surrender to it.

The punishment he intended to deliver was to be far more severe.

So why did he hold back?

After all that Imayoshi had done.

You are not one of us. You never were.

He glanced back.

Akashi sat expectantly.

“Thanks,” he said. “For what it’s worth.”

And he slipped out, sealing the room behind him.

Chapter End Notes

**Points of Clarification**

*Timeline--Akashi, Aomine, and Kagami board a train bound for Hirosawa from Casimir on the morning of Day 8. They disembark in Hirosawa on the evening of Day 10, for which Aomine spends until the evening of Day 11 contained in a guest apartment when Kagami fetches him.*

*Assassin grades--Selene ascribes rank to their assassins ranging from E to A and each denomination fulfills a separate role. A and B are international, expert members, who serve spymasters employed by the Rus-Ainu in chapters across Fumetsu and Zhestokiy, including dependencies and exclaves, and Selene. Grades C through E are
domestic and reside in service strictly to Selene.

*Your Majesty--Aomine's facetious dig at Kagami *lady-in-waiting* refers to a European custom of a woman of lesser social status escorting or assisting another woman of superior class to royal functions, usually in some form of servitude. While Aomine was trying to be sarcastic, Kagami's actual regal teachings set him straight in that, as heirs, they are, in fact, equal in rank as princes.

*Snow Leopards--Considered a vintage familiar, the snow leopard participated in the Fire's long-standing struggle with the Ice throughout the last thousand years to claim a firm foothold in China. First in 300 BCE, then later in the 14th century, the cats were trained to stalk and kill Ice Apparitions when winter fell--a grave disadvantage for Fire Apparitions. Since 1700, they have been formally retired from military service and the few hundred left protect farmland.

*Jian Democracy--Intimated in previous chapters by Aomine and others, Jia/Nise is known to be vehemently conservative and resistant to change. As a democracy, the majority word influences the course the nation takes. Evidently, Momoi and Araki serve in government positions. Equally evident is that despite their seemingly equal office on the board of directors, their weight in deliberations is not as great as Wakamatsu or Aomine, other board members. While women generally are not discriminated against in Ice society, their position as leaders is a fight-in-progress, evidenced by Aomine's assertion that Araki's sex eliminated her chance of succeeding Imayoshi as Dan.

*Die Young--Daichi, age 79 at death, would have looked no older than 26. Nori, 72 when she died, appeared to be 24.
“Wait,” Momoi said, “you said ‘you guys.’ Does that include Dai-chan? Izuki-san told us he’s here.”

“He is.”

“Is he not coming home?”

Kagami stepped into the quaint room. Two knocks granted him entrance.

“How’re you feelin’, killer?”

Kuroko sat on a loveseat positioned cattycorner to a queen-sized bed. Momoi was perched on the plush arm beside him. The small space emulated the atmosphere of a den with sparse but cozy furnishings to satisfy temporary housing. Complete with a full bath, a closet and dresser for storage, and a nook for business or leisure reading. Aomine’s guest apartment supplied the same amenities.

Kuroko smiled. “It’s good to see you, too, Kagami-kun.”

Kagami pocketed his hands. Akashi’s earlier ridicule still stung. On the walk over, he’d worked to steady himself. The meeting with his brother and Aomine had not gone at all how he expected and he could not stop himself from puzzling over just how much of the discourse was honest or pure snake oil.

Turbulent thoughts calmed and he determined he would have to shelve the problem for later.

Purporting the best mask of indifference he could, he said, “All things considered, you look good.”

“I wish I could say the same for you.”

He scowled. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

The shadow’s expression remained characteristically passive. “Your face looks troubled.”

So, the mask was imperfect. He should have guessed those sharp eyes couldn’t be fooled.

Still, he thought he’d try. “It’s the scrapes and bruises, isn’t it?”

“If you insist, Kagami-kun,” Kuroko said with a barely-there smile.

“What brings you here?” Momoi asked.

No malice hinted her tone.
“The warden’s prepared exit procedures for you guys back to Goryokaku,” he told her.

“Akashi-san wouldn’t appreciate hearing you call him that,” Kuroko said.

Without censor, Kagami spat, “I don’t give a shit what he thinks.”

Surprise claimed them. Kagami chewed his cheek.

“Wait,” Momoi said, “you said ‘you guys.’ Does that include Dai-chan? Izuki-san told us he’s here.”

He suppressed a groan. He was tiring of the Dai-chan rhetoric and in no mood to be berated again for not spoon-feeding them answers he either did not have or would not satisfy them.

“He is.”

“Is he not coming home?”

The anger he anticipated was instead replaced with disappointment. Perhaps this encounter would turn out better than his last.

“He and Akashi are discussing that now. His exit strategy isn’t as cut-and-dry as yours.”

She seemed to understand, saying, “That’s right.” Solemnity led her eyes downcast. “He’s not the same Dai-chan anymore.”

“Sure he is,” Kagami said. “He’s still annoying and obnoxious. Now he can glow in the dark.”

Amusement lifted the gloom darkening her face. “You’ve known him for almost two weeks and that is all you’ve gleaned of his personality?”

“There’s more. I’m just smarter now not to share it in front of you.” At the expense of bruised genitals.

She laughed.

Even Kuroko couldn’t withhold chuckling at his plight.

She gestured. “I won’t apologize for that.”

“Don’t need to,” he said. “Just know that your stay ends tonight. For your sake—if not then hopefully for mine—Aomine will be joining you. And I can hit his ass with the door on his way out.”

“Too much foreplay,” Kuroko asked.

Kagami groaned. “He’s… a handful.”

“I thought you got along well.”

“That was before he could power an entire city block by himself.”

A thoughtful look came to Kuroko’s face and he craned to look up at Momoi. “Sounds like something we’ll need to be prepared for.”

He couldn’t help supplying, ”Take it from me, you get used to it quickly.”
Disbelief widened Momoi’s eyes. “Dai-chan electrocuted you?”

“You’re looking at a veteran lightning rod.”

Two knocks rapped the door. Kagami stepped farther inside as Kuroko admitted the visitor.

Izuki Shun entered.

“What the hell took you?” Kagami asked the spymaster.

“Mibuchi likes to be thorough.”

Earlier when he reached out for an update on Kuroko’s condition and location, Izuki mentioned a brief meeting with the War Administrator, Mibuchi, and predicted the appointment would be short.

He decided not to press.

“While I was at it, I organized a protection detail to oversee their journey to the temple once they disembark at the border station.”

Izuki explained to them all the Lord’s deportation arrangement. A contingent of Shadow Apparitions and Bokoku military police would navigate them to Hirosawa Station and board with them on their transit north. Once they reached Nise, a caravan provided by Wakamatsu awaited to complete the convoy homeward. Rail lines that once webbed the country and interconnected with Pervobytnyy Les in the north, Tōketsu Sabaku in the west, and Bokoku in the south had been abandoned since the 1800s. The vigorous tag team onslaught of the Rus-Ainu had smothered the Ice’s long-standing international trade and travel agreements. Imayoshi’s later-imposed isolationist policy ensured nature would reclaim the lines, burying any evidence hospitable cooperation between the powers.

Izuki turned to Kagami. “What’d the boss tell you?”

“Everything on his end is ready. Save for one thing.”

He guided Izuki out into the hallway. He twisted to peek back inside, to Kuroko and Momoi, and signaled for patience, then closed the door.

“I’m gonna need you to hang back with these two for a bit.” His voice was just above a whisper.

“What’s the wrinkle?”

He told the spymaster about the funeral pyres.

“Strange that Akashi would be so hospitable.”

You’re telling me, Kagami thought.

“If that’s the case, shouldn’t I bring them when you grab Aomine,” Izuki asked.

“You’ll be bringing them eventually.”

Curiosity pinched Izuki’s brow. “This have anything to do with the Kaizer’s secretary?”

“How do you—”

“I’m loath to admit it,” Izuki sighed, clearly bothered, “but I cooperated with Susa Yoshinori to
manage security policies and procedures by screening any and all foreign dignitaries entering Bokoku. Now that he’s abandoned his station, I’m no longer subordinate to him.”

Izuki wrangled his bitterness with a sharp breath. “I only know the secretary’s business here concerns Akashi and Aomine.”

Kagami peered over his shoulder, at the sealed door. There was no way to know if Kuroko and Momoi were eavesdropping. Eventually the full truth of Aomine’s birth would be shared but not by his mouth. It was not his place or responsibility. Besides, it had gotten him in enough trouble already.

He felt confident Kuroko was patient enough not to overstep and pry loose an explanation. After all, he’d been present for the prologue to Aomine’s family drama in the fort armory.

However, Izuki was not. And since his greatest rival would swiftly become a principal political interest to the spymaster, Kagami decided it couldn’t hurt. “Sakurai Ryou was Imayoshi Nori’s midwife. He was there the night Aomine’s parents died.”

Apprehension registered on Izuki’s face.

Then he nodded and said, ”Just page me. What will you do in the meantime?”

No question there. Akashi’s unprecedented hospitality wasn’t the only strange thing about their meeting.

“I need to see Akashi again. Something he said doesn’t sit right with me.”

Or, more accurately, something he did. The meeting overall had been a disastrous fiasco. He left feeling equal parts ridiculed and incensed and a peculiar aftertaste of suspicion embittered him.

Normally Kagami did not censor his criticisms or complaints about Akashi to Izuki. But he didn’t want the old shadow’s pathological paternal instincts to kick in and talk him down.

To his relief, Izuki didn’t dig for clarity. He just nodded.

Kagami popped the door open.

Neither Kuroko nor Momoi had moved from the loveseat. He jerked his head from where it rested on her thigh. She yanked her hand from his head, as though she’d been stroking his hair.

Kagami wondered about the display of affection between them. And why they felt the need to hide it.

“Is everything okay?” No panic carried Kuroko’s voice. As one caught doing something sordid would exhibit.

All the more odd but Kagami deferred his interest.

“Peachy,” he said. “I need to visit the warden. You’ll stick around here with Izuki until the midget lets me know he’s bored jerking chains.”

He turned to leave.

“Before you go,” Kuroko called.

He stopped and faced the little shadow. Kuroko pushed himself from the sofa and approached.
“If I ever gave you the impression I did not value your help that could not be farther from the truth. However, I would be lying if I said I believed your proximity to Aomine-kun was not a means to your end.”

“You were right not to implicitly trust me.” Kagami laughed. “You’re tiny and practically invisible but you deliver a very believable threat.”

Kuroko smiled and raised his right hand. Gauze bandaging wound each finger, the pinky lacking a joint. He formed a makeshift fist.

“Thank you, Kagami-kun.”

He lifted a fist and gently tapped the shadow’s knuckles. “Since you’re feeling grateful, there’s something of mine you’re holding onto that I’d like back.”

Realization brightened Kuroko’s eyes. “So you noticed.”

“I didn’t forget,” he huffed, with emphasis. “I was distracted.”

Kuroko padded to the dresser and reached into a seemingly empty sack pooled on top. From it he pulled a folded sheet and walked back over.

“I have to ask, though.” He waved it. “Why?”

“Peace offering.”

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*Apparition World Map*

Chapter End Notes

*Points of Clarification*

**Tōketsu Sabaku**, meaning *Frozen Desert* is a Fire Apparition exclave that encompasses all of central Mongolia and parts of northwest China full of Fire-Ice hybrids whose genome has evolved to tolerate the steepes and taigas.

**Pervobytnyy Les**, meaning *Primeval Forest*, is the large European country of the Lightning Apparitions and the seat of their empire, situated across the southern half of Russia, the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and northern Mongolia.
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Aomine brought the packet, backside up, onto the table. He studied the characters.

A final message from parent to child.

Words hidden for a century.

Chapter Notes

Not much to say except now that vacation is over I have time to finish this. :)

Aomine trailed after Sakurai as the escorts guided them through the capital toward the library. One of numerous buildings orbiting the main keep like electrons around a nucleus. Tile-roofed curtain walls dissected Hirosawa into districts connected by doglegging and roundabout walks preserved from feudal times when confusion and geography played to wartime success.

After a fifteen minute trek, they entered the library.

Lavish oak furniture, polished marble tiles, and ornate runners filled the cathedral-size interior. Shelving stacked high, rolling ladders in place to ascend to heights of what Aomine estimated to be at least twenty feet to the topmost row. A crenellated ceiling captured the shimmer of firelight from wall-mounted torches. Tabled candelabra, wicks aflame with a cozy tepid glow, illuminated the deeper reaches where no windows permitted sunlight. Sleeping cast iron braziers plotted in naked corners and centered in aisle intersections awaited the rise of night. As they plunged farther in, Aomine appreciated the rustic ambience but couldn’t detract from thinking the excessive firelight was an ironic hazard waiting to happen.

The escorts ushered them silently through several interconnected antechambers, each one a reflection of the last, decked with a variety of leisure amenities from floor mats and cushions to wall-mounted exam tables and stools. Book spines jutted from shelves in sparkling gold, ruby, emerald, and turquoise. Decorative vases sprouted rolls of parchment and honeycomb-shaped cubbies carried leather journals and plastic envelopes cradling fragile twine-bound pages absent of dust jackets.

They left the main building and entered a cloister. A lush willow tree dominated, rung by a circular walk and manicured hedges. Apparitions lingered among wooden benches but were too immersed in themselves to acknowledge their presence. Candlelight reached from openings on their left, as though inviting the curious to enter. They stopped at one of the yawns.

Aomine followed Sakurai and one of the escorts into a parlor-like space, unfurling fourteen feet square. Opposing arches offered only to proceed left or right.

The shadow stared at Aomine and motioned. He understood. Pick one.
Then the sentinel bowed back into the cloister, assuming guard with his partner.

“I’ll be sitting out here,” Sakurai said, ambling toward an arm chair.

One of three pieces of furniture in the room.

“You’re just gonna wait?”

He didn’t like the touch of helplessness but hoped the secretary would overlook it.

Sakurai parked himself. “I can only provide you your parents’ messages. I can’t tell you how to interpret the words or how you should feel about them. However, if you have questions, I will do my utmost to answer them.”

He couldn’t shake the uncertainty that filled him. An ill-preparedness he’d not felt in a long while.

His fingers stiffened against the envelope, carried at his side.

He strode through the left portal into another chamber no larger than the last. Daylight stained a low table. Gapped shears caressed by a gentle breeze draped a window stretching one wall. In anticipation of nightfall, a set of floor candle stands strobbed. In the far corner was tucked a desk and stool.

No door existed to ensure privacy. Just curtains withdrawn into wall hooks. Not much of a defense against sound or the smell of musky incense permeating the air.

Better than nothing.

He untucked the drapes and settled on plump floor cushions. He brought the packet, backside up, onto the table. Again he studied the characters.

A final message from parent to child. Words hidden for a century.

He unwound the tie and pulled out four sheets. Pristine for their age. Minimal signs of fading. The foremost page was tattooed with recognizable kanji script laid in rows rather than columns. Smooth, wispy syllabary, sparse punctuation, and simplified strokes told him the language was Japanese. Written with a disciplined and steady hand.

His mother’s hand.

He began reading.

1906, September 2

My darling Daiki,

How I wish the circumstances of your birth were so different than reality has permitted. How marvelous would it have been for you to enter a world free of hatred and injustice and
intolerance? Reading this letter now, you must know all too well the unfortunate burdens of this life I’ve spoken of. I have always dreamed of a world where we Apparitions, blessed by Her to live 300 years, would be endowed with wisdom and compassion. To live alongside one another in a world grander than our own feeble existences.

From nothing we rise and to nothing we all someday return.

Breed, gender, ideology. These fictitious concepts do not change the inevitability of mortality. They do not govern the will of Her world. Even the holiest of hermits, the most astute of sages, are bewitched and enticed to erect invisible walls that only further divide us all. The Dark Ages have long since passed but demons of the day survive still in the hearts of once good Apparitions who believed as I do that unification, not segregation, is the gateway to a blissful life.

When your father holds you, so tenderly as though you would shatter, I see in you our gateway. Try as he may, in life or death, Shouichi cannot seal that portal. Because in time it will also become your gateway. Daichi does not share my belief but I know you will be reared by my brother. Killing us is but a trivial chore to him.

But you.

You are a reflection of myself. My body will not decorate his home or office that much I know.

You will live on. A trinket for him to gaze upon and remember. I have no doubt your abduction will develop nefarious ends to his means. As you are also the sole heir to your father’s illustrious legacy. One my departed brother has for years sought to defame.

I know of the Aomines and their heinous barbarism.

Yet unlike Shouichi, I know every tree bears diseased branches.

Aomine is a powerful, imposing, and majestic name. From atop the blue peaks, your great radiance will shine. I’ve always believed your name to embody this.

Be strong, Daiki.

Shouichi will not strip you of this proud title but he will try his damnedest to smother your light.

I leave you with a prayer:

Look not to the stars for celestial guidance for you are helpless nor within your own heart for you are cynical. To judge the true worth of yourself you need only look into the eyes of those closest to you as their gaze will reflect your honest self.

Forever my darling son,

Nori

Aomine’s thumb stroked the signature. A single kanji. Pressure expanded in his chest, ascending into his knotted throat. Tears pricked his eyes.

She knew. The tone of her words and unwavering stroke of her hand may not have betrayed her but she accepted that she was going to die.
Maybe a little too easily.

He recalled what Akashi had said before, in his office.

Seventy-two years old. By that age, he had tried and failed three times to foster a family and been divorced little over ten years. He couldn’t imagine, at fifty-five when he and Momoï’s firstborn entered the world, coping with the inevitability that he would never live to raise his child.

Imayoshi amounted her feelings for his father, their relationship, and her decision to abandon all who may endanger that, a careless and naïve mistake. As he’d read her words, he was struck by her austere practicality. Rather than fight a system she knew was rigged against her and dodge traps set by Imayoshi to snare her, accepting death was her victory.

Because, in the end, even one hundred years later, Imayoshi lost.

Aomine examined the next sheet. Coarse and jagged lines, like rudimentary waves, filled the page. He squinted. Through the jumble recognizable letters sprung from the cursive to suggest it wasn’t just senseless scribble but nothing that he could decipher.

What the hell was this even supposed to be? Considering his father’s upbringing in Pervobytnyy Les, it must be Cyrillic. He’d never seen the script in cursive before.

His father’s penmanship was atrocious.

Guess that’s one more thing he inherited.

Unfortunately Cyrillic was not among his language bank. There had to be a translation. If his mother believed Imayoshi would raise him in Jia, there must be.

He revealed the third page.

Kanji. Also written in rows.

A block of text at the top right corner grabbed his interest.

*Transcribed for the unprecedented future.*

He scanned a few passages and realized it was not his mother’s hand. The spacing, strokes, and pressure reflected such neatness that he thought it the work of a machine. If but for a few transfer smudges. Remarkable. Could this be Sakurai’s work? The little man could speak his language. Proximity to his mother and exposure to Japanese-speaking Apparitions under tenure as a sovereign’s secretary would enhance comprehension.

He should extend his appreciation later.

Until then, he read on.

1906 September 2

*To my son Daiki,*

*Just days ago you entered my life as such a small, fragile thing but I feel that you are my*
single greatest accomplishment. I would happily surrender the mantle of Kaizer if it meant I could openly and without molestation raise you together with your mother. The name Aomine is tainted with such ghastliness and carried by such despicable characters that choosing your name was a simple matter.

Daiki. Great light.

I wholeheartedly feel, while watching you sleep and knead your impossibly tiny fingers in hands unstained with blood or greed, that you will shine bright in the abysmal pit we Aomines have dug for ourselves.

Your mother adores you as if you were her sun. She is a spiritual, judicious, and ardent woman. Inspired as I am by change. There are many, as I’m certain you have by now experienced their kind, who are not as welcoming.

They are confused, thoughtless vessels fueled by hatred as machines are powered by coal and fire. Their flame, while it may be weak, never burns out. The wall of malevolent hellfire blinds them to the true path to peace and growth and all they hurt as they blaze their destructive paths.

It has only been two days since your birth and though it is a miraculous and joyous event, a shadow lurks along the fringe of our happiness. A darkness that has long followed your mother and I. Stalking. Lying in wait for the inevitable moment when exhaustion overtakes us.

And overtake us it will.

I do not know where you future will take you but I want to clarify one thing for you that I was unable to make clear to my aggressor before my death.

Imayoshi Shouichi is a sick man. Of mind and soul, not infirmity or persuasion. Whatever he may tell you as truth will most certainly be a lie, constructed from a foundation of outdated and stubborn principles and self-imposed paranoia. Not even the love he held for your mother, his sister, could lift the veil of intolerance from his eyes. He refuses to believe that I, an Aomine man of the Lightning, am capable of selfless genuine love for your mother. He believed her bewitched by me and his delusions have enflamed tensions between his nation and mine. As I write this I continue to peer into your nurse’s arms at your peaceful unaware face to record these precious moments of your life before my world forever blackens.

Ryou is a remarkable and competent confidant, well loved by your mother and I. Though he cradles you as if you were his own I know he will be no match for Imayoshi when he comes.

No matter what the outcome may become or where you end up, whatever nationality marks you, whatever tongue you speak or customs you embrace, you will always be my son.

Which is why I must now apologize that my release procedures have been heeded. You can no longer be afforded the ignorance of the name Aomine or protection from the ghouls that lurk along the tortuous path that awaits you. I have done all I can to provide safeguards to ease the misery I am regrettably certain you will endure as was the expectation when my father passed this curse onto me. But I know, with inexplicable assuredness, that you will set us all free, Daiki.

I am so unbearably sorry for placing this inescapable burden on your shoulders…
Aomine squinted as the handwriting took on an abrupt change. Clear strokes became rushed and scribbled. He struggled to unravel the twisted characters.


Who wrote this? Surely not his mother. Or Sakurai. He doubted his father was responsible.

Perhaps it was the aforementioned guardian?

His attention gravitated to an anomaly.

Two words penned in stiff katakana.

アルテミス。アポロ。

Artemis. Apollo.

Who were they? Real people? Or fictitious symbols meant to unify the hidden intent of the message?

He had no way of knowing. Cracking riddles and puzzles was more Tetsu’s strong suit than his. Delving into obscure mysteries and plucking clues to arrive at a definitive conclusion. Seeing solutions so easily missed by others as if they shone like beacons through the cracks of disarray, silently proclaiming their presence.

If only he could help.

He spotted more to the original message below the strange insert.
Suppressing the melancholy brimming inside him, he read on.

_Your radiance may be great but when swallowed in darkness you are but a distant flickering star in the imposing majesty of the moon. Heed this warning, son. My youthful arrogance and assuredness have failed me as Kaizer and you as well. For now you will be without me. An incompetent father._

_For all my shortcomings in my seventy-nine years on this earth, you are the one thing I do not regret._

_I love you._

_More than you will never know._

---

Tears streaked Aomine’s face. His throat swelled painfully as he fought to restrain himself. His fingers were frozen around the sheets. As though sensing that applying the slightest pressure would fracture the words like broken glass.

Emotions spiraled wildly within him. For so long he had simulated this moment. When he would finally discover the truth of his roots. To learn who his parents were as more than figments. Confirming if they truly loved him. Wanted him. The pessimistic miasma that shrouded his thoughts was finally exorcised by a reality he could only ever fantasize about. Words finally given flesh and consciousness.

For years, he couldn’t comprehend that he shared a commonality with either of his departed parents. He could not have been more wrong. Twenty-four years separated their experience of fatherhood, Aomine being fifty-five when his firstborn emerged. The excruciating sensation of inadequacy that pitted him as his offspring died.

His father felt it, too.

Except the roles were reversed. Anticipating his own death rather than receive word of his child’s unprecedented demise.

He read the last few lines again.

_I love you. More than you will never know._

The pages slipped to the table as he cupped his head. He sealed his eyes, tears tracking his cheeks.

He knew exactly what his father meant. Because when mourning the passing of each of his children, pressing a final parting kiss to their tiny, cool foreheads, he’d whispered the same thing.

_I love you more than you will never know._

An eventuality Imayoshi secured by forcing him to undergo the exact tragedy with his children that he’d played upon his parents a century ago.
For a child to leave the world prematurely without ever knowing their parents’ love was lamentable. Terminating parents from their infant’s life, leaving the orphan to ponder the worth of their existence, was downright despicable.

And for one hundred years that belief, tucked deep in Aomine’s subconscious, poked and prodded. Speaking just loud enough to be heard.

Now the voice was silent.

He was loved. And wanted.

To hell that the words took their time to reach him. Their meaning was just as poignant in ink as they would be in speech.

He took a moment to allow the confluence of chemicals assaulting his brain to flush away. No more stifling or overwriting, as Imayoshi programmed him to do when he was overwhelmed.

Pressure ebbed, loosening the taut muscles of his neck and tears dried.

He scrubbed his face and drew an invigorating breath deep into his chest.

A strange feeling settled. Was this what closure felt like?

Or was it something else?

His father’s warning floated back to him and he searched for the passage. Again he read the words. Trying to decrypt something tangible among the mysticism. Russian would have most likely been his father’s preferred tongue. If not English, as necessity among political figures holding high office demanded. Translating either into any of Jia’s dialects could clutter apprehension with unintended double meanings or misinterpretations to match original syntax and diction as closely as possible. But beyond the scope of hiragana and a few kanji, he could gather nothing comprehensive.

Maybe Satsuki could help make sense of it.

Aomine swept the pages back into the envelope.

He kneaded his forehead.

The funeral pyres had yet to be lit. No bodies existed to be consumed by fire. The ash of their lives scattered to the winds. Flesh once embraced disintegrated. Memories, on the other hand, proved far more resilient. Satsuki had violated Ice funerary customs fifty years ago when she incinerated the remains of their children. Knowing utilization of fire in religious rituals or practices was strictly forbidden. Disposing of the deceased was a precise science. Decomposition was slowed over the course of a month or more. Cyclic salt dusting and alcohol rinses were applied to the corpse. Organs liquefied along with skin and muscles until only a skeleton remained. Bones were ground to powder. Remnants repeatedly filtered of impurities and confined to a vase, jar, or other container. Sacramental herbs and oils anointed the vessel. Survivors would erect an altar or other such reverent space to honor their loved ones.

Albeit reduced to the water of life, as mortuary practitioners humbly called it. Never truly erased.

To cast the dead to flame was the ultimate sacrilege.

But Aomine understood.
Satsuki wanted to let them go. To remove their imprint not just from the world but herself. She firmly believed their passing a consequence of some physiological defect. Looking upon their reliquaries would not bring her closure or peace. Only remorse and shame.

He stared at the single line tattooed on the back flap of the envelope.

*Our son, Daiki.*

And asked himself.

Was he ready to let them go?

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