In Lands Beyond

by Alshoruzen

Summary

Kaito and Shinichi have been assigned to join the Suzukis on their next trading expedition beyond the Wastelands. It is a bewildering and enlightening experience. KaiShin

Notes

Like the rest of the Fort Verse stories, this is part of my Different Suns fantasy AU collection of KaiShin stories on FF.Net.

"Wait, they want us to escort the trading party?" Kaito repeated, making no effort at all to hide his incredulity. His slice of honey-slathered toast remained hovering halfway to his mouth as he stared across the breakfast table at the source of the news. "That's amateurs' work! Why would they send us?! We're one of the best teams they've got!"

Shinichi gave his partner a deadpan look as he neatly cut a piece of his own toast off and placed the bite-sized portion in his mouth (he supposed he could have used his hands like Kaito was doing, but he didn't want his fingers to get all sticky). "You do realize that we've only been in the field for a year. Technically speaking, we're still amateurs."

"That doesn't change the fact that we're awesome," the Knight argued. "Our record's flawless!"

"I thought you would have been excited to have the chance to go and see the lands beyond the
Wasteland borders."

"Well, yeah," Kaito admitted. "At another time, maybe. But they're sending out a special expedition
to the Locked Oasis at the same time the trading party is supposed to leave. That sounds way more
exciting than escorting the Suzukis. Don't you think so?"

"Don't drag me into this," the Scout grumbled. "You should know as well as I do that only teams
ranked six and above can go on special expeditions like that. We may have a great record for
beginners, but we still have a long way to go before we can qualify. Besides," he added, turning
away as a faint flush crept up into his face. "I've always kind of wondered what it was like out
there."

Indigo eyes softened. "You should've just said so from the beginning. Of course we'll go then."

Shinichi considered pointing out that they didn't actually have a choice in the matter, but he was
touched by Kaito's gesture, so he decided to stay quiet about it.

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Although the Fort stood far from the heart of the Wasteland (no one had ever managed to set foot in
the heart of the place, and some believed the Wasteland to be endless, but that was an issue for
another time), it was still a considerable distance from the borders of the unforgiving territory.

The journey from the Fort to the outer fringes of the Wasteland would take three weeks on foot
before they reached one of their outposts. There, they would be able to continue on horseback. The
horses would be able to carry them all the way through the mountain passes that would lead them
into the outer kingdoms.

For the most part, it was a very uneventful journey. The convoy was attacked once by a pair of
Wasteland Beasts, but the Beasts had been small and easily dealt with. Once they reached the
mountains, Wasteland Beasts were no longer a concern. There were bears and wolves in the
mountains, but such animals rarely bothered people unless people bothered them first. Still, Shinichi
was a little disappointed that they didn't see any bears or wolves. He'd never seen either type of
animal before anywhere outside of a book. He'd been looking forward to it. Maybe they would be
luckier on their way back.

They arrived in the big city of Kor a whole week earlier than they had anticipated. Their party of
travelers was immediately rushed to the house the Suzukis kept there. Though technically a manor
house owned by the Suzukis, the place served as an unofficial embassy for the people of the Fort. It
was their farthest outpost, Sonoko liked to say.

Shinichi caught a fleeting glimpse of a sprawl of buildings and glittering windows over the shine of
the water of the river before he was ushered inside. He wanted to go exploring the city, but first
things' first. They had to unpack, and then they had to help prepare for the night's big party. It was,
Sonoko had told them, a tradition of sorts to throw a big party upon arrival and invite all the high
officials and other big names in the area. It was both a gesture of friendship and an opportunity to
make connections and begin negotiations.

As the envoy's guards, Kaito and Shinichi didn't have to worry about the negotiations, but they were
expected to show up and make a good impression.

"We'll just have to wait to go exploring tomorrow," Kaito said as he glanced out of the window of
their room at the city across the river.
Shinichi nodded, his own eyes fixed in wonder upon the skyline. "There's so much of it…"

"Well, that's only to be expected. Their population is several times larger than ours. And this is just one city. There are supposed to be many more cities just like this out here."

"It's hard to imagine," the Scout murmured. Even more than the sheer number of buildings and size of the city, however, it was the feeling of so many people out there. He could sense them like a roiling, chaotic mass. It was a storm on the edge of his awareness that might all too easily sweep him away if he wasn't careful.

A warm, calloused hand caught his. "Shinichi?"

Blue eyes blinked then focused on Kaito's concerned face.

"It's nothing," he said quickly. "It's just…I forgot there'd be so many people."

Kaito pulled him into a reassuring embrace. Shinichi relaxed, focusing on the warm, strong presence of his Knight.

It was the Scout who eventually broke the silence.

"We should get going," he said reluctantly. "Sonoko will strangle us if we're late."

Kaito snorted. "She can try." But he let Shinichi go. After all, annoying as the girl could be sometimes, she was still a friend. And he supposed he still owed her a favor for her help with Shinichi a few months back.

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It was a formal party, and that meant formal clothes. However, since this was also something of a meeting of cultures, everyone had come dressed in outfits representative of their peoples, stations, or professions. The result was something that looked like a costume ball—except that neither Shinichi nor Kaito had ever been to the lands beyond the Fort before, and so they didn't have much of an idea of what was normal around these parts.

Aware that his Scout didn't much like crowds (or parties, for that matter), Kaito had planned to stay close to him. They could politely introduce themselves to the guests, eat, linger just long enough not to be rude, then go back to their room. Duties fulfilled, they would have the rest of the night to themselves. And with the loud music playing at the party, well—, no one would be able to hear much else.

A small smirk tugged at Kaito's lips. His dear, adorable Shinichi could be quite vocal given the right—incentive.

It would be a perfect night. They were, after all, pretty much on vacation until the return trip.

Or at least it would have been the perfect night.

Kaito's plots—er, plans—had, however, been thwarted when he and Shinichi had gotten separated by the overly boisterous crowd. And he'd just been accosted by a girl in a rather extravagant dress. He could sense that Shinichi was still relatively close through their bond, but the strange if admittedly pretty young woman had wrapped an arm through his without asking and was batting her eyelashes at him. He wondered if she was drunk.

"My friends told me that you're a knight," she said sweetly, still attached to his side.
"I am," he agreed, subtly drying to dislodge the girl while he looked around for those friends she'd mentioned. This girl probably needed someone to take her back to her room if she was already drunk enough to go wrapping herself around total strangers. It wasn't safe.

"That's really amazing," she murmured, batting her eyelashes at him again.

He raised an eyebrow. Half the population of the Fort were Knights. There was nothing unusual or particularly amazing about it. It was just the way they'd been born. It was the skills you honed and the work you completed that determined whether you were impressive or not. And there was no way that this girl knew about his particular record or ranking, was there? He supposed someone could have told her, but his intuition was saying that that wasn't so.

Oh well. No point being rude.

"Thank you," he said, smiling.

She giggled. "If you're a knight though, shouldn't you be wearing armor?"

"Why would I want to weigh myself down with armor?" Kaito asked, puzzled. Any armor that could withstand a blow from even a very small Wasteland Beast would have to be so heavy as to render a person completely immobile. And a few more blows from said small Beast would be the end of the idiot. The proper way to defend yourself against a Wasteland Beast was to either use a magical shield or, better yet, avoid getting hit altogether.

The girl seemed puzzled by his response. "All our knights wear armor."

"You have Knights too?" Kaito asked, surprised.

"Of course. They're holding a tournament tomorrow in the central plaza. Would you like to come watch? I can even introduce you to some of the contestants," she added, leaning closer to him again and smiling. "I know several of them."

Intrigued, Kaito agreed.

In another part of the room, Shinichi had found himself accosted by a trio of kids.

"Hey, you're from the Wasteland, right?" the little girl in the group had asked, eyes bright with excitement as she tugged on his sleeve.

"Yes."

"Oh, oh! Tell me what I'm thinking!" the larger of the two boys exclaimed.

Shinichi stared. "…What?"

"You're psychic, aren't you?"

"Uh…not really, no…"

The kids all looked disappointed.

"Are you sure?" the girl asked.

"Pretty sure, yes."

"But everyone says the Fort's where psychics come from!" the second boy argued, crossing his arms
and giving Shinichi a look that suggested he thought the Scout didn't know what he was talking about. Which, for Shinichi, was even more baffling than the children's questions.

"Well," he said finally when the three continued to stare at him expectantly. "A Scout's magic does give us the ability to perceive some things that others cannot."

"So then what is it if it's not reading minds?"

"It's more like a sixth sense for the presence of things," he said after some thought. "You can think about it is a kind of vision that extends much further than your eyesight does and which isn't hindered by darkness, sandstorms, or any other physical obstacle."

Three pairs of eyes lit up.

"You mean you can see through things?" the large boy exclaimed, impressed. "That's so cool!"

"It's…not exactly like that," Shinichi tried to explain. He'd never had to think about how to describe such things before. It was common knowledge among the people of the Fort. "It's not quite as definite as that. Like I said, it's more about the presence of things. When those things are alive, Scouts can sense them because we can sense their spirits—their emotions. When the objects are not living things, we can feel the space they occupy. With that, we can often tell how big they are, what shape they are, what they're made of, and that kind of thing. However, we couldn't tell you what color those things are or what exactly they look like. It's more about the general, big picture."

"Oh," three voices chorused. The children all looked like they were thinking really hard in an attempt to understand what they'd just heard.

"You must be really good at hide and seek," the little girl concluded, face brightening again. "Do you want to play?"

All three children looked at him with excited anticipation. Shinichi cringed inwardly.

For a Scout, especially one whose gift was strong, being around too many active minds was like standing in a room full of screaming people all trying to talk to you at the same time. The fact that these outlanders couldn't shield their minds the way the people of the Fort could greatly exacerbated the problem.

Shinichi's head was already beginning to throb. The mere thought of trying to search for these kids in the midst of that racket was enough to make him feel nauseous. But how to decline without hurting their feelings? They were, after all, just being friendly.

"I'm sorry," he settled for saying. "But I'm afraid I'm a little too tired for games today. We had a long journey."

"Oh right. You guys only just got here today," the freckled boy recalled.

"Then why don't we show you around tomorrow?" the girl suggested. "You haven't been to the city before, right? There're all sorts of things to see."

"That's true," he agreed, hesitant.

"We'll show you all the best places to eat," the taller boy said, excited.

Shinichi had to smile at their enthusiasm. "All right then."
Plans made, the kids ran off, leaving Shinichi to wade through the crowd. It was getting hard to breathe. He stumbled a little as he was jostled from behind.

It was probably only a few minutes but it felt like an eternity before he found Kaito. Or maybe it was Kaito who found him. It didn't really matter. He was just relieved to have Kaito's arms around him again. He closed his eyes, letting his Knight's familiar presence fill his senses, drowning out the clamor that was the chaos of emotions around them.

"Are you all right?" Kaito asked, concerned.

"I'll be fine," Shinichi murmured, voice muffled because he had his face buried against Kaito's shoulder.

The Knight's hold on him tightened. "Let's get out of here. I'm sure we've stayed long enough not to be rude."

Shinichi nodded, all too happy to let Kaito lead him out of the ballroom and back to their quarters.

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Morning crept through the window to chase away the shadows and warm the room. Though there were two beds in the chamber, only one was occupied. Cracking open one eye to gage the time by examining the light in the sky outside, Kaito debated with himself for a long moment before deciding a tiny bit reluctantly that it was time to get up. He glanced down at Shinichi where the Scout was curled up against his side and smiled. He could let Shinichi sleep a few minutes longer.

Slipping out of bed, he made a beeline for the small bathroom. A quick bath later, he donned a set of casual clothes and dragged a comb through his unruly hair (not that it made a wit of difference). When he was done, he returned to the bedside. Leaning down, he dropped a kiss on Shinichi's nose.

"Wake up, Love. They'll be expecting us at breakfast soon."

Shinichi made an incoherent mumbling sound and tried to burrow under the blankets. Chuckling, Kaito flipped the top of the blanket off of Shinichi's head.

"Now, now, don't make me get the ice water."

Bleary blue eyes cracked open to glare grumpily at him, but, eventually, Shinichi relented and uncurled. He yawned the sat up. Given a choice, he'd rather skip breakfast altogether, but he knew Kaito wouldn't let him. Slowly, he clambered out of bed and shuffled into the bathroom.

The warm water was so soothing that he almost fell right back to sleep. He was a little sore in places that still made him blush even though it was already several months after they had completed their bonding. Thinking about it made him feel warm and a little giddy, and he woke up a little more.

Out in their room, Kaito shook his head, lips quirked in a small, amused smile. He could sense Shinichi's peaceful, happy mood. Maybe missing that trip to the oasis wasn't such a big loss after all.

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"I don't like the idea of you wandering this city by yourself."

"I won't be by myself," Shinichi replied.

"Three brats aren't exactly what I call reassuring company."

Shinichi only shook his head at his Knight's grumbling. "This isn't the Wasteland. We're not going to be attacked by roving Wasteland Beasts."

"That doesn't mean there aren't other dangers. You should know that," Kaito argued. "And what about all the people? If attending the party was a strain for your senses, the markets are going to be torture."

"The city can't be packed everywhere. I can manage. Besides, I already promised them I would go."

Kaito didn't look satisfied, but he relented. "This tournament thing of theirs is taking place somewhere called Fountain Square. If you're not there by noon, I'll come find you."

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There was a world of difference between reading about something and experiencing it in real life.

The kids had all sorts of places they wanted to show Shinichi, saying that they were the most important places in the city. Strangely enough, most of these important places had turned out to be eateries. Shinichi had been forced into trying almost twenty different dishes he had never even heard of by now. It was...certainly an experience, he concluded. Although if they insisted he eat another bite of anything, he was going to explode. Sure, the dishes had been small, but he'd never been a big eater. The fact that more than half the dishes had been sweet didn't help.

Now though, the kids had brought him to a somewhat dingier side of town that Shinichi wasn't entirely sure looked safe. The people around here looked rough. Some appeared to have been in many fights before, but they did not carry themselves with the poise or pride of true warriors. These were mere thugs with no art.

"There's a shop here that sells antiques," Ayumi was saying, tugging on Shinichi's hand until they were inside a dimly lit shop crammed from wall to wall with furniture. "It's like a maze in here. We come to play all the time. You can imagine you're searching for lost treasure in the mountains or trapped in some labyrinth looking for your way out."

"Yeah, we totally lucked out when we found this place," Genta added.

A mere fifteen minutes in the winding mass of furniture of all shapes and sizes was more than enough to prove to Shinichi that this place deserved to be called a maze.

"Oh hey, let's play hide and seek," Mitsuhiko suggested. "We never got to yesterday. And this place would be perfect."

The other two agreed enthusiastically before turning expectant eyes on Shinichi. Figuring there was no harm indulging them this once, especially since the shop was all but deserted, Shinichi agreed.

It turned out he didn't even have to resort to using his Scout senses because the kids were, frankly, terrible at hiding. At some point, however, hide and seek turned into tag because the kids would run when he found them, laughing all the while. He didn't understand it, but that was kids for you.

Though the three could wiggle through the small spaces between the furniture, Shinichi's training meant that he soon had the three cornered.

"All right," he said. "Game's over. It's time we—"

Before he could finish, the three darted past him and out the antique shop's back door. Holding back a groan, he ran after them.
The kids had no sooner crossed the threshold then there were several yells and curses. Worried, Shinichi threw open the door to see the three kids tangled in a heap with several rough looking men who had apparently just tripped over them.

The biggest of the men growled as he picked himself up. "Damn it, we lost 'im! You brats! You're gonna pay for gettin' in our way!"

"B—but we didn't mean to run into you!" Ayumi protested.

"Yeah!" the boys echoed.

"You lost us our haul, you insolent rats. Now you're going to face the consequences!"

"But—"

Shinichi lunged, knocking the feet out from under the closest of the men. The knife the man had been pulling from his belt flew from his hand as he fell with a yelp. Said knife sailed at one of his colleagues, forcing the other man to duck. Considering they were all standing in a narrow alley, he quite naturally bumped into someone else.

Shinichi took the opportunity while the thugs were sorting themselves out to order the kids to run.

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Kaito looked around the city square with interest. It was packed full of people, but a large space had been marked off in the center of the plaza in front of a gigantic fountain. The Knight spent a long moment admiring the roaring whitewaters cascading down into the pool-sized basin. Shinichi would like to see this. He had to make sure he brought his partner here later. There were no such fountains at the Fort. Shinichi had always said he wanted to see a real waterfall someday, but they had yet to have the chance. This fountain wasn't a real waterfall, per say, but it was probably as close as something manmade could get.

"Oh, you came!"

Turning, he saw the young woman who had invited him to the tournament the other night. With her were several other young women and men.

"Who is this guy, Emmy?" the tallest of the young men asked, eyeing Kaito warily as he hovered close to the young lady's shoulder.

"He's a knight from the Wasteland," the girl explained. "I invited him to watch your contest today."

"You're a knight?" The young man's incredulity was obvious. He looked Kaito up and down with a faint sneer. "You don't even have a sword."

"I don't need a sword," Kaito replied. What was with these people and their strange questions anyway? Sure, everyone at the Fort had to undergo combat training, and most of them could wield at least a few weapons with ease. But such tools were only really useful against Beasts when enhanced by a Knight's magic. So, while he did carry a knife and a bow when they went on missions, Kaito had always preferred to fight hand to hand.

"Some knight," the boy snorted.

Emmy elbowed him. "Don't be like that, Haru. Maybe they use other things in the Wasteland. Everyone says their warriors are really amazing."
"Amazing at trickery, you mean," Haru muttered under his breath.

"Oh, hey," one of Emmy's female friends exclaimed suddenly. "He can join the tournament. He can, can't he?"

"What?" Haru spluttered, clearly aghast at the suggestion.

"It is an open tournament," one of the other young men said with a shrug. "But he couldn't participate even if he wanted to if he doesn't have a sword and armor."

"He could always borrow some," Emmy suggested.

"You can't just borrow armor," Haru argued. "It's got to fit you. And besides, everyone needs his own weapon. What if he has to the person whose sword he borrowed?"

"That's easy. He can borrow someone else's if that happens. Come on, let's go talk to the registration people."

"Excuse me, my lady," Kaito interjected. "But I really only came to watch."

"What, scared?" Haru sneered.

"No. I simply did not intend to stay for the entire event."

"Well that's no problem then, since obviously you won't have to."

Kaito raised an eyebrow at the insult. And seriously, didn't this twit even realize he was contradicting himself? First he wanted Kaito to stay out of the tournament. Now he was taunting him, claiming Kaito was too unskilled and cowardly to enter. Then again, jealousy could really screw up a person's logic. Kaito hid a smirk at the thought. He didn't need a Scout's senses to see that the boy was jealous because Emmy had been paying Kaito so much positive attention.

On the other hand, silly or not, the boy's rude mocking demanded a response.

"How about this then," Kaito said, pulling on his best diplomatic smile. "Since I would hate to disappoint your lady friend, why don't we have a little warm up match right now? You can consider it practice for your tournament."

Haru blinked, taken aback by the suggestion. But then he looked at Emmy and straightened, puffing out his chest. "All right then. I accept your challenge. The tournament's about to start though. We can have our match after round one. There'll be a break then. I assume that wouldn't be too late for you?"

Kaito shrugged. "Of course."

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With three uncoordinated kids and one person who knew next to nothing about the city, it wasn't long before Shinichi and his trio of self appointed guides found themselves cornered in a dead end. Each of the kids was in the grasp of one of the thugs. Shinichi had managed to avoid being grabbed until one of the men put a knife to Ayumi's throat and ordered him to freeze. Not wanting to be the reason an innocent child was murdered, Shinichi had done as told. Now his arms were being held behind his back by another ruffian. Shinichi knew he could get out of the man's hold without too much trouble, but the problem was how he was going to free the kids and get them all out of here. It would all come down to timing.
Concentrating, he reached out once more for Kaito through their bond. He could sense that his Knight wasn't too far from this place. He let his anxiety and sense of urgency travel through their link in a silent request for help before turning his attention back to the thugs.

"What do we do with 'em, Boss?"

"Obviously we're going to kill them. Right Boss?"

"Wait, look at his clothes! He's one of them sorcerers from the Wasteland. Their demon magic can tear a man to pieces with just a touch!"

"If he could really do that, wouldn't he have done so by now? I think this one's the other kind. The ones that find things and read minds and stuff."

"What does it matter? Just kill 'em and be done with it. We gotta go if we want to catch that traitor!"

"Hold your horses," the leader snapped, gaze fixed on Shinichi. "Tell me, boy, you're one of them Scouts, aren't you?"

"And if I am?"

The man smiled. The expression was not reassuring. "Then you might have a chance to save yourself and these little runts. You see, one of our men betrayed us. He ran off with our loot after killing the man he was on guard duty with. Then he disappeared on us. We've been searching high and low for him with no success. We might've got him today if not for your brat friends here. And that does not make us happy. But, if you help us find this traitor, we might consider letting the brats go unpunished. So, what do you say? Do we have a deal?"

Shinichi drew in a deep breath then let it out slowly. He doubted these men would keep their word. However, Kaito would come for him soon. And any delay could open up more opportunities for escape. All he had to do was keep these men happy until Kaito arrived.

"All right," he said stiffly. "I'll help you find your traitor. But you let the kids go now."

The man tutted. "Do you take us for fools? Keep your end of the bargain and we'll keep ours. But how about this. Just so you understand we're men of our word, we'll let one of the brats go now."

At his signal, the man holding Genta struck the boy hard on the back of the head, knocking him unconscious. Both Ayumi and Mitsuhiko cried out in alarm, but they quieted quickly under their captors' glares.

"Leave him here," the leader ordered. "The other two come with us. Now," he turned his cold eyes back on Shinichi. "I think it's time you got to work."

"I will need some information."

"Well then, we had better move this operation somewhere more...comfortable."

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Combat in the lands beyond was certainly different, Kaito reflected. There was a lot more posturing, for one thing. And it seemed to be traditional for the combatants to trade verbal insults before they got around to any actual fighting. Some of the swordsmen were decently skilled with the blade, but the weight of their armor and weapons meant that none of them were particularly agile. On the other hand, he supposed the extra weight lent power to their blows.
"So what do you think?" Emmy asked, latching onto his arm like she had the night before. Only this time he was fairly certain she was sober. He supposed she was just a tactile person, but he could see that Haru fellow glaring at him from where he was waiting with the other tournament participants. Clearly the man had no faith in his lady. How pitiful.

"It is certainly entertaining to watch," he said. "Very enlightening."

"What are duels like where you're from? Do you have tournaments?"

"Not really. We do spar quite frequently to keep our skills sharp, but as far as rankings go, that is determined by your performance in the field. We have never held a contest for the purpose of determining whose best. I assume that is what this is about?"

"Well, I guess so. I never really thought about it," the girl admitted. "It's one of the best ways for knights to prove their skills to everyone and make a name for themselves. Though since this is a small tournament, it's not as serious. You should see the big ones! There're people from all over, and there's music, dancing, feasting, and all sorts of fun and amazing stuff!"

"Your lands must be very peaceful."

Emmy looked confused. "What do you mean?"

Kaito only smiled. In the Wasteland, you proved your skills by returning alive from patrols. Now he could understand the oddness he was seeing here. These warriors had skill, but their skills were honed for sport and for pride, not for survival. He wondered if they knew how fortunate they were.

The moment Haru won his bout, he made his way over to them. Emmy ran over to congratulate him, gushing compliments. The young man was looking distinctly smug until his gaze landed on Kaito.

"So, you still want to duel?" he asked, sneer returning.

Kaito considered reminding the other that it was he who had wanted to duel, not Kaito, but he could see a lost cause when he saw one. Instead, he shrugged and smirked. "If you want, I have no objections." It was getting boring standing around anyway.

"Hey Yahiko," Haru called to one of his friends who had finished his match earlier. "Lend him your sword, would you?"

The other young man shrugged and tossed his blade at Kaito, who caught it deftly (wondering if these people had no sense for weapon safety. Shinichi would have a lot to say if he was here).

"You can borrow my helmet too," he offered.

Kaito laughed. "No need."

Haru's eyes narrowed. "Don't blame me if you get hurt then."

"I appreciate your concern," Kaito replied with his best cheerful smile which he knew would annoy the uptight prick. "But I'll be just fine." He hid a smirk at the sight of the way Haru ground his teeth. People with short tempers were always fun to poke.

Soon, a space cleared around the two of them. Someone must have said something about the 'duel' because they had gathered quite an audience. Kaito could hear murmurs about 'demon magic' and sorcery. Where they were getting such nonsense, he had no idea, though it kind of made him want to laugh. Perhaps he should give them a show.
On the other hand, he mused, watching Haru cast an anxious look at Emmy before squaring his shoulders, he was starting to feel sorry for Haru. Wanting to impress his lady wasn't a bad thing, even if he was going about it all wrong in Kaito's never humble opinion. Did Kaito really want to humiliate the guy in front of his lady friend just for being a little rude? …Nah, that would be too cruel.

"Are you both ready?" Yahiko asked, having been appointed referee.

The two combatants nodded.

"Right. Then you may begin!"

Balanced and ready, Kaito waited, watching Haru carefully. The outland knight had raised his blade into a fighting stance, but he didn't seem eager to make the first move.

That was when he felt it.

Shinichi was worried.

That sudden and disquieting piece of knowledge distracted Kaito long enough that he almost didn't notice that Haru had charged. Fortunately for the Fort Knight, his years of battles against Wasteland Beasts had him gliding easily around the boy's large swing. Honestly, the boy left himself wide open every time he attacked.

Kaito would have gone easy on him, but that feeling in the back of his mind was intensifying. He could feel not only concern but fear. And if calm, level headed Shinichi was beginning to panic, the situation had to be bad.

"I don't have time to waste here," he growled as Haru came at him again, this time with an almighty blow from above that would have been impossible to block by ordinary means. He was probably expecting Kaito to dodge, but the Knight was already at the end of his patience. He had to go now. So he reached out with his left hand—the one not holding a weapon, invoking his powers as he did so. There was a flash as the blade descended.

The next thing anyone knew, Haru's blade was spinning away across the ground. Haru himself had been thrown backward. He flew for nearly a dozen feet through the parting crowd before hitting the ground.

There was a shocked silence.

"Sorry," Kaito said quickly, pivoting on his heels and setting off at a run. "I have to go." That said, he was through the still frozen crowd and out of Fountain Square. He raced down packed streets that soon became dingy and semi deserted ones, but he didn't pay any of it any attention beyond analyzing them for threats.

Shinichi was ahead.

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"So you say he's in here, is he?" The robbers' boss looked up at the shabby warehouse building.

Shinichi nodded stiffly. "Or at least there's someone in there who fits the criteria you gave me."

The boss snorted. "Well, you better hope you're right. You only get three tries. You three, stay here with the prisoners. The rest of you will go in with me. We'll go in two teams, seeing as there are only
two entrances. Oh, and one more thing." He turned to the ruffian holding Mitsuhiko. "If that traitor's not in there, kill the brat."

The little boy's captor grinned a nasty grin. "You got it."

The boss and his remaining flunkies approached the building, leaving their prisoners alone with their guards. There was little chance of being seen by unrelated passersby because this part of the city was occupied by almost nothing but warehouses. This particular section of warehouses looked especially run down. It did not look like it saw many visitors, and there certainly hadn't been anyone else since the robbers and their captives had arrived.

The kids were pale and trembling. Shinichi cast them both a worried look before turning his attention to the three guards. The two holding the kids had decided to set the two children down by the wall of the warehouse opposite. Since the kids were both bound, there was little chance of them escaping. Now, one was putting dead leaves of some kind into a small, bowl and stick contraption. A pipe, Shinichi recalled. He'd seen one in a book once. The other had folded his arms and was now leaning against the wall, eyes fixed on the warehouse into which his boss had disappeared.

Only Shinichi's captor was actually holding onto his prisoner. He had one hand holding the rope that they had used to tie Shinichi's hands behind his back. The other held a long knife which he occasionally poked at the small of Shinichi's back. The Scout could sense the man's eagerness to kill. It was a disgusting vibe that made Shinichi feel slightly nauseous even to stand next to the guy.

That was when Shinichi sensed it. His Knight was here.

It was time.

As quickly as he could, Shinichi ducked and pivoted. The man behind him let out a grunt and thrust his knife forward. The blade sliced through the air just past Shinichi's arm as the Scout kneed the man in the crotch. The guy doubled over, dropping both his knife and the rope securing Shinichi's hands. Shinichi hopped back and brought his foot up and around, kicking the man in the side of the head. The robber fell back and lay still, knocked out cold.

At the same time that Shinichi was decking his guard, a figure had descended upon the two men watching the children. The man with the pipe got hit first as the smoke twisting out of his pipe suddenly roared upward in a little pillar of fire. He yelled and threw the thing away, but not before getting burns on his nose and face. The other man found a boot connecting solidly with his stomach. The moment he folded over, a sharp elbow struck the back of his skull, and he went down like a boneless sack of gravel.

"What's going on here?" A new voice cried. Kaito noted with some chagrin that Haru and his friends had followed him.

He didn't have time to respond, however, as the man with the burns had recovered enough to draw his dagger. The man lunged. Kaito brought his hand up, concentrating. Steel shattered. Splinters of metal spun away as the man fell back with a horrified scream. Then Kaito's fist connected with the man's chin, and the guy went down.

"Why did you attack these people?" Haru demanded, running up with his sword raised like he was considering attacking Kaito next.

"He saved us!" the kids chorused instantly. "Those men kidnapped us! They were talking about killing us because we accidentally helped their partner get away!"
"There was an uncomfortable silence."

"So are there more?" Kaito asked, turning to Shinichi. He reached out to tap the ropes still binding the Scout's wrists. They split at his touch and fell in heavy coils to the ground, leaving behind angry welts. The sight of those made Kaito's blood boil, but he forced himself to calm.

"The boss and the rest are inside that warehouse now. They're...punishing their traitor." Shinichi winced as echoes of the man's pain, despair, and rage reached him. He sank to the ground, curled over his stomach as he fought the urge to gag. Everyone in that building was a mass of twisted, negative thoughts and feelings.

"Um, is he okay?" Haru asked uncertainly.

"He'll be fine," Kaito replied. "But he needs rest. Do you have local authorities who handle these kinds of things?"

"Yeah. One of the others already went to call the Watch. They'll be here shortly."

"When they get here, remember to tell them there's more in the building over there. I'm taking Shinichi back to the embassy."

Not waiting for an answer, Kaito scooped Shinichi up into his arms and left on long, steady strides.

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"Here."

Shinichi accepted the glass of water from Kaito with a grateful smile. The cool liquid was a blessing. It cleared his head.

Kaito sat down on the bed beside him. "Feel better?"

Shinichi nodded, taking another long sip of ice water. "Thank you."

"Something's still bothering you though," the Knight observed.

"It's..."

"If you say nothing, I'm going to tell Sonoko you agreed to model clothes for her when she goes to make the clothing purchases for bringing back to the Fort."

Shinichi blanched. "I wasn't going to. I just..." He let his breath out in a long sigh. "I keep thinking about that man. The one those thugs were after. I know I didn't have a choice, but I keep wondering if, well... Maybe I should have tried to stall longer before leading them to him. I just..."

"You're feeling guilty that they got to him because of you."

Shinichi didn't respond, but he didn't have to.

Kaito sighed, leaning back on his hands and looking up at the ceiling. "I get where you're coming from, but you have to remember. You had children to protect. And that guy wasn't exactly some innocent bystander. He was one of them before he betrayed them. He's probably caused his fair share of damage too—to regular people who wouldn't have deserved it. Whatever happened to him, he brought it on himself."

"I guess, but... I can't help but wonder, maybe he left them because he wanted to change?"
"There's no point making assumptions like that. Though if it makes you feel any better, someone who just wanted to change wouldn't have stopped to loot his comrades before leaving."

"…You're probably right."

"Of course I am," Kaito said airily. "So now that that's settled, I found out they have a patio on the roof. We can swing down to the kitchen for some food and have ourselves a picnic."

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