Summary

they say no great love will fades away without a trace

Notes

written for Lumi as part of the Lamento SS 2015. Have a lovely holiday season! As you'll see i’ve taken a lot of liberty with post-canon GE speculation, but hopefully you enjoy this!

See the end of the work for more notes

Rai had never been a particularly heavy sleeper – he’s been quick to learn that life spent wandering in the forests of Sisa came with unpleasant surprises if one let his guard down even for a moment. There’s been less to be afraid of now, with the void receding, life slowly seeping back to where it was taken from – but who knew what could lurk in the ever-moving green, especially so far from familiar ground?

He’s been good, usually, stirring at every unfamiliar sound that brought the premonition of danger; it’s even gotten to the point where he’d be on his feet long before anything actually came forth, some sort of instinct keeping him alert no matter what. This is why it’s beyond startling when it’s his Sanga that rouses him with a gentle touch, long before the Moon of Day dyes he brim of the sky golden.
A wave of panic overwhelms him, a surge of adrenaline, before his eyes meet Konoe's and there's a hand at the back of his neck, soothing. That means they're in no immediate danger, otherwise there'd be no room left for a gentleness like this. Still, he's on his feet in no time, dagger in hand, sword a comfortable arms' length away.

'What is it?' he asks, voice rough from sleep. Konoe merely shrugs his shoulders in response.

'I'm not too sure myself, to be honest, I'd like you to see it, though.'

They've been camping on the edge of a clearing, some sticks and logs stacked against the trunk of an old pine, cloaks draped over the top and disguised with loose branches here and there. Relatively well-hidden if you don't know it's there, sparse enough to be able to keep on lookout if need be. Right now, though, all that seeps in between the branches is a calm cool darkness.

Konoe leads him out of the makeshift tent and into the clearing (and he tries to ignore the little burst of warmth that he gets every time that small warm hand is in his and another's being moves so in synch with his, because right now's not the time.) There's still no sense of immediate risk, the telltale sinking awareness of danger – just a mild subconscious hunch that something is off.

It's only once they've reached the other side of the clearing that Rai sees it, first faint, then more and more evident the more he looks at it. In the distance, a feeble light sways between the trees, like a distant campfire.

'Was it there the whole time?' He'd had to have been so very careless if he's missed it from the start – he was the one scouting for a good place to stop for the night, after all. Konoe shakes his head, though.

'I couldn't sleep for a while. Not like a restless couldn't sleep, I just felt really at peace. I decided to look around the clearing and saw it floating around. It was very faint at first, and moved around a little, and now it's just been staying still where you see it.'

'Do you think it's harmful?' Rai narrows his eyes. Night travellers were not completely unheard of, but they was certainly in the suspicious category. The land was still unsafe, after all.

'It doesn't feel so, to me. On the contrary, I was sort of drawn to it.'
The little flame glows in the darkness, a diffused warmth swaying from side to side, almost like a lantern rocking in the wind. Perhaps that's what it was, left alight by a careless hunter or merchant as they slept.

'Another traveller's camp?' He muses out loud.

'That's what I thought first, too.' Konoe hums in agreement. 'But see how high up it is? From what I remember of yesterday, everything’s kind of flat around here.'

'A light suspended in the trees?' Still didn't explain why someone felt the need to put one on in the middle of the night, but it was the only reasonable explanation.

'Perhaps.' his Sanga speaks, turning away momentarily – to hide a poorly stifled yawn, no doubt. 'You'd like to check it out?'

'To go for it in the dark, with zero awareness of our surroundings and zero idea what we're up against? I'll pass.' He really was a reckless cat sometimes. 'We could stop in the area tomorrow, though. It's in the direction we're heading, anyway.'

'That definitely sounds better.' There's no complaint from Konoe's side – the smaller cat has been up for a while now, after all. 'We should keep watch tonight though, just in case.'

'We should be able to see it from the shelter.' Rai nods. There was still a lengthy journey ahead, and they needed the rest. 'Come.'

Now that he's known exactly where to look and what to seek out, the spark was indeed visible from their camp, faint but steady. Konoe was right – the sight brought forth no malice or fear, just a curiosity of sorts. His companion's tried to keep watch with him at first, trying to keep conversation and pay attention, even as his movements became more and more lazy, and he'd no longer hide his yawns. It's not long before sleep claims him, half-sitting against the trunk, face tucked into the crook of Rai's neck – and the Touga doesn't fight the sudden urge to draw an arm around him and guide him closer. The smaller cat smells of evergreens and dew and hope, and in these brief moments between night and dawn he finds himself wishing that none of this fades away, that no harm comes to the one who's come to mean so much.
The following morning is clear and refreshing. They do scout the direction in which the light was coming from, a little more south of the overgrown trail they were following. The results leave the hunter feeling strangely unsettled.

'Surely it was no farther than this,' Konoe grumbles, turning to see how far away they've come from the clearing. In the night, it didn't look like the mysterious beacon was more than 50 tails away, but they've already spent hours tracking...well, tracking nothing, to be exact.

'I don't wish to be of arrogance,' Rai frowns at the untouched undergrowth at his feet, earning a chuckle from Konoe, 'But never before have I failed to record a trace of one's presence. Say no-one lodged here for the night – even a passing traveller should leave broken twigs, or patches where the grass has been pressed down. You cannot just pass unnoticed.'

'Well, pass they did – though I'm not sure how' The only signs of intrusion to this pristine part of the forest has been the ones they've left behind. Even stranger was the fact that this wasn't exactly the best area to lay a trail through – thick, spiked trunks and bracken almost as tall as themselves; above their heads, the canopies so tangled you could hardly see the sky. 'At least they've done so bringing us no harm.'

'Yeah.' Rai casts one look around the thicket they've found themselves in. 'I guess there's not much we can do except leave this be, and pretend we never saw the flame. Now, come on, it's gonna take a while to get back on the trail…'

...Except the light is back once night falls. This time it's Rai who's on watch when it appears, just in the way Konoe described it – a barely visible spark at first, meandering around, then stopping to a halt, hovering on the spot.

'You know,' Konoe's resting on his shoulder again as they watch – this time from high up a thick branch of a tree - just in case. 'This means it's been following us – or we've been following it, unknowingly, whatever it is.'

'In all the years I've been a hunter,' Rai grumbles, swatting away Konoe's laughter of 'come on, you're barely older than me!', 'I must say being stalked by a floating glowing mass is quite something.'
The night passes like that, sitting side by side, watching the strange flicker in the distance. It should make him anxious, but Rai has to admit it has a lulling quality to it, relaxing, even. There's little sleep that night, but the morning doesn't leave him exhausted, and they're quick to continue their journey.

They're almost at their destination when Rai starts to pick up on little things that make him want to grab Konoe by the shoulders and just hold him there, make sure he knows there's someone always there for him, all kinds of sappy nonsense. His pace has slowed down since they've started, but it's not from a physical fatigue – he's already called for an extra break when they were just an hour away or so. He's been stopping here and there, examining the trunks of trees, and the local flowers have apparently become of interest. He's stalling, Rai realises, and the reasoning is not foreign to him.

'You don't have to do this, you know.' he finds himself saying. 'I'm happy to turn back right now if you'd prefer that.'

'I do, though.' Konoe shakes his head, drawing to his feet again. 'Have to do this, I mean. Besides, it's not really a bad thing, I don't think. Come, we're almost there.'

It was only a brief walk until they've emerged onto another clearing, and Konoe had paused to take in the sight before him, shoulders stilling.

There, in the valley beyond, had once laid the ghost of Karou.

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After more and more of the land, treading which would have meant certain death before, was reported as 'released' from the Void, cats from larger villages such as Ransen began to wander off in search for new homes. Some went off in search for new adventures; many had sought refuge when their villages were on the brink of destruction, and now longed to rebuild them. It was a dangerous task, of course, and hard work, so many relied on hiring warriors and hunters to assist with the process, as guards or for labour. When word came to Ransen that help was needed to assist things in Karou, Rai simply pulled his Sanga into an embrace - gruff, but full of unspoken feeling – and announced they'll be leaving for the village in two moons' time.

He'd expected it to be hard, seeing the remains of what once was home once again, but he finds
himself looking into the valley and it gets a bit easier to breathe, almost. He expects to see nothing but ruins, what used to be streets and pavings grown over in thorns, the smell of decaying lingering in the air even now. What he doesn't expect is a field of lush green grass that only grows in springtime, with the slightest hint of first flowers here and there. As they make their way down into the valley, the smell of something so, so very familiar mingles with the smell of smoke – a cloud of it can be seen rising over the village. The scenes he could see in his mind whenever he closed his eyes – they all rushed at him from between branches that flourished, as if the Void has never touched them.

Most of the debris have been removed to the side, giving way to the few houses already fully restored, some were in the middle of constitution. Building supplies – piles of logs and tools were arranged in neat packs, some that he's never seen before (they must've been brought over from Ransen); work camps formed a circle around what was presumably a heath in the centre. Laughter and exclamations of encouragement carried from the village, something that hasn't been heard above this clearing for so long, from before the Void came to be – and birds, Konoe hasn't realised how much he's missed Karou's birds.

The majority of the small pack of cats that came out to greet them turned out to be adventurous volunteers who felt they could no longer remain oblivious to the damage the Void has caused, having lived in the safety of Ransen for most of their lives. Konoe recognised a couple of cats that he had known before – noone he was particularly close to, or neighboured by. Despite him having left the village as a traitor and a curse, they seemed genuinely glad to see him, and exchanged a warm welcome. They were a little vary of Rai at first – stoic and withdrawn, sword at his side – but warmed up to him after they've gotten to business and toiled side by side.

They were initially here as guards, of course, but frankly there wasn't much for them to do. Not a single sign of threat was noted, so after a while of examining the area and making sure no patch of land was still Void-stricken, the two cats joined the rest in collecting material, treating logs, hammering them together and so on. Konoe had a pretty good knowledge of how the houses of Karou used to be put together; Rai caught on pretty well. It was an interesting experience, surreal, almost, being a part of making something once so dear, then so distant exist again. By the time night has fallen, Konoe was ready to collapse and rest, drained physically and from the welter of thoughts and impressions of today.

They were offered one of the huts that have been rebuild – an appreciation of their help, no doubt, but it didn't feel right to intrude on the villagers. The completed shelter was scarce, and there were cats – even the two precious women and the children that came with them – sleeping with nothing but the Moon of Night over their heads. Instead, they've opted for their makeshift shelter once more, away from the main campfire so that Konoe didn't feel anxious about it; Rai was ready to volunteer for them to keep watch on the second round.

For now, though, it was good to stretch his muscles, to feel the rejuvenated soil beneath him. To
have his Sanga curled up to him, resting on his chest, arm thrown over his shoulder, and he can almost feel his heartbeat, can bask in the warmth and the sudden sense of peace that washes over him.

'It's weird.' Konoe murmurs somewhere into his collarbone after a little while.

'Hm?'

'I expected to feel sorrow again, expected grief or nostalgia or...or something, you know?'

'It's good to see a Karou with a future,' Rai lowers his eyes in agreement, reaching down to place a kiss to Konoe's forehead. 'To see something prevail no matter what.'

'I feel…' Konoe stops, shifting even closer to the white cat, tail flicking about restlessly. 'It's almost an empty feeling, but a nice empty? It's bittersweet but it feels like everything's had turned out the way it was supposed to be.'

'Feelings are so irrational.' Rai shrugs, drawing his arms around the smaller form that has always fit against his so well.

'Aren't they just so.' Konoe perks up at that.

He lifts his head up so he's looking at Rai, peering into his face with something that can't be quantified as anything but adoration. Feelings are among the worst of distractions, but also among the best, he decides as he strokes a thumb across Konoe's cheek, brushing away loose strands of hair, and the Sanga leans into his touch, nuzzling at his hand. He smiles, and his eyes fall closed and there's nothing Rai wants to do more than lean down and kiss him.

He doesn't really get the chance to do it more than once – they're interrupted by the sound of footsteps, worried voices of the village cats getting closer.

'This doesn't sound great.' Rai sighs, stretching again before getting himself into an upright position. Just as he reaches for his dagger, there's a timid voice calling out from the outside, wondering if they were asleep.
A bunch of cats are huddled by the tent by the time he peaks out of it; their torches are aflame, but they're not armed – most aren't even in their working clothes, so again, it's probably not something awful and deadly.

'What bothers you?' Konoe moves to stand beside him.

The cats hesitate – there's a few concerned glances among the group, and a whispered 'Oh come on, just tell them!' among the group. Finally, one of Karou's original villagers steps forward.

'We didn't want to bother you with something so small at first,' he sighs. 'but there's been something strange going on in the forest ever since we got here.'

'Strange?' Rai raises an eyebrow, hand instinctively moving towards the hilt.

'What is it?' What a reckless cat – Konoe seems more curious than concerned, drawing his cloak around him, already ready for all kinds of adventures.

'Rather than speak of it, I think it's easier to show you.' The cat nods, a gesture towards the black mass around the clearing. It's quiet as they move away from where the fire is left blazing, occasional sparks flying into the air with a crackle – only the trees sway in the wind, a monotonous drone.

Rai's actually not all that surprised with that the cat leading them points out in the inky black of night. The familiar sliver of flight flickers in the far-off brush as he focuses on it, as if to greet them.

'It's been there on the very first day we came.' Another cat – one of the females – approaches them on the side. 'We didn't think much of it at first – it never comes closer, and it does not harm us. But it's been there ever since, and no-one knows what it is.'

'Has it been there every night?' Konoe is the first to offer something to say.

'No – sometimes it only flickers briefly, and some nights it doesn't show up at all. Never during the day, either, though it's harder to see during the day.'

'How about last night?'
'Nothing was seen.' someone else is quick to respond. 'Nothing on the night before, either.'

Yes, because for the last two night it's been too busy tracking us, Rai thinks, but the villagers don't need to know that.

'Has anyone tried to seek it out?' he questions instead.

'A couple of our men tried to,' The cat that approached them first admits, 'Though all for nothing. It felt like it was floating away, always out of reach. We feared getting lost in the dark, and so we've turned back.'

Probably a wise choice, though now it feels like they couldn't just dismiss the incident. The light flickers again, taunting him, a mystery just out of reach.

'We can attempt to seek it out,' he offers, and he hopes the reluctance isn't too evident in his voice, 'Though we cannot promise anything.'

'Oh, you don't have to.' The cat shakes his head. 'It can be quite dangerous to go in there after dark – besides, it doesn't really bother us that much. We just wanted to know if there's any knowledge of it in Ransen, or if you two anything have any information.'

To Rai's surprise, it's his companion that insists they do go – 'Only for a while, we won't wander in too deep, alright? Plus I'm well familiar with the area around here.'

That's how they find themselves making their way through the thicket, submerged by darkness, with the Moon of Night staining the very tops of trees above them silver, leaving some patches of light here and there. Rai was cautious to proceed, dagger exposed, tensing at every rustle of leaves, or a twig snapping; Konoe, on the other hand, charged directly towards the light, oblivious to how much noise he was making and how easily would it be to track them.

'You don't think the cats of the village were correct?' They've been walking, if not running, through the forest for quite some time, but the light is not nearer in the slightest. It hasn't changed its direction relative to their trajectory, nor has it grown in size or intensity; perhaps only the hue of it got warmer.
'About it never being within reach?' Konoe throws him a glance over his shoulder. 'Yeah, it certainly seems this way. I wonder if it's moving away from us on purpose.'

'We'll never catch up to it at this rate.' Rai signs, sliding the dagger back into the sheath. 'We should head back soon. We've been moving aimlessly for quite a while now.'

Konoe comes to a halt at that, as if he's only seemed to take in his surroundings now.

'You're right...I didn't even realise how far in we were getting.'

'If it moves away from us, we could interpret it as meaning it seeks no conflict,' This is a reasonable claim to make, after all. 'It won't bother the villages either, if that's the case.'

'Yeah, again, I guess you're right.' Konoe's still looking at where the glow is concentrated, something between a torch and a cluster of fireflies – his entire stance radiates reluctance to give up on the chase.

'I thought you're not that fond of fire anyway.' Rai allows himself some dry humour in there, and Konoe finally looks away to meet his eyes again.

'I'm sorry I got so carried away. We should return to the village. It's just that…' He rubs the back of his neck, an awkward gesture, like something embarrassing is bother him; then shakes his head.

'No, I'll tell you later. Let's head back now.'

—

He only tells him once they've gotten back to the village, where they were surprised to see most of the cats awake and awaiting their arrival, anxious to have them back. They seemed more relieved at their safe return than disappointed by the fruitless outcome.
When Konoe cast one last glance into the forest's depths, the light was no longer there.

'That more more of a disturbance than a gesture of help,' Rai swats at Konoe's arm with his tail in mock irritation. 'All on your incentive.'

'I know it was a bit unreasonable.' They're back in their shelter and once again, Konoe is making himself comfortable, quite content with using his Touga as a pillow. Their tails are practically entwined, and Konoe's fingers on his wrist give him the oddest of sensations – like night, like home.

'I just remembered...You promise not to laugh?'

'Of course.' he's had to admit he's poked fun at Konoe and pretended to judge his gentle, empathetic nature perhaps more than necessary, but he's never make fun of something genuinely important.

'The night I was leaving the village for the first time.'

'When you were the fleeing sacrifice?'

'Yeah,' and Rai instinctively draws him closer, a quiet anger tightening in his stomach. No-one was to hurt his Sanga, not if he could help it,

'That night, I got lost. I got lost, and the Void was everywhere and.' Konoe laughs against his skin, 'I wasn't sure if I was going to make it out of here alive. But there was a light, similar to that, except it was a lantern. I saw The Poet come to my rescue then.'

'The Poet? Shui?'

Konoe nodded, hand tracing patterns on Rai's arm, absent-minded, and, well, the fighter isn't sure what to say to that, so he leaves the space of silence, if it's needed, space for grief, space for memory.

'He led me to safety, then, and a few times after. He was always looking out for me. And yeah, I'd get the same feeling like with that light, so I though…' he trails off into a sign. 'It's comforting and sad at the same time, don't you think?'
'I guess it looks relaxing at absolute best, if you disregard the fact that we've been practically stalked by this thing.' Rai snorts. 'Although, you've always been better with feelings than I.'

'Thank you for doing this with me.' Konoe whispers against his ear, small and drowsy.

'The pleasure is mine. Consider it a workout before sleep.', as if stacking logs all day wasn't one enough. And thank you for sharing what you've said with me, he'd wanted to add, but it would have rang hollow in the peace that stretched between them.

'No, not just the chase. Just coming here with me. I know this place will never be the same – my house is still in shambles and the whole clearing has been marked by death, but – it still feels like a piece of home is rooted here.'

'I know.'

Rai remembers Setsura. Remembers how even after he's sworn no connection to the place, taking Konoe there had felt special. He hopes it's enough.

'I wonder if the light will be back tomorrow.' Konoe yawns again, and Rai draws his tail over the smaller body, humming in agreement.

'We shall see.' The mystery might be there at the back of his mind forever, unsolved, but he could stress about it when the new day came. 'Sleep for now, Konoe.'

Rai has never admitted he loved anyone. Not even to himself. Definitely not to Konoe. He almost says it now, though, in the velvety dark, as the smaller cat drifts asleep in his arms, but something tells him the boy might already know.
Out there in the darkness, two shadows still remain, meandering between the trees.

'Do you really think it's alright for them?' A voice disturbs the still of night.

'You do not trust the one who fights?' A companion's answer, a melody.

They are one with the forest, watching the village as it slowly drifts to sleep. It's good to see it rejuvenated, good to see it breathe in tact with everything again.

'He stood beside him at the breaking of this world.' The companion reassures. 'The love they bear alone was enough to oppose you when no-one else dared. When no-one else tried.'

'Yes.' A flick of a tail, as if in irritation, but the dry chuckle that follows implies otherwise. 'I've never been more proud of a downfall.'

'It all worked out in the end, I guess. Not in the best way, but…'

'You're happy, then?'

A recline of a head until it came to rest upon his shoulder, hair the colours of autumn cascading down the black of his cloak.

'Now, on the other side of the end? Eternally.'

Then, after a brief pause:

'This whole not really manifesting into anything thing is a bit weird, don't you find?'
'You'll get used to it, I'm sure. It's not like we're in a rush.'

'I wonder how long we'll stay like this, whether we'll integrate into the forest completely or something like that. What if we're just to be like this till the end of days?'

'Would you be so opposed?' A quirk of an eyebrow, and a hum of content from the second form, and then he's reaching so that their fingers are almost laced together.'

'I wouldn't say so.'

'Stop trying to hold my hand, will you?'

How did that even work? This insufferable Poet doesn't even have hands if they got to the technicalities of their current quasi-existence. He's had to try very very hard to not stress about the mechanics and sciences of what has happened to leave them so firmly connected to the fabric of Sisa – the notion alone broke very single law he's known.

He's always thought he'd welcome the end, when it came. Now, he found he wasn't the one to complain.

'It's pleasant, though.' His companion smiles, a stroke of thumb across his.

'Sadly, I can't argue against that one, but it makes those things really hard to balance.'

A flick of a gloved hand through the air, and the three golden spheres above their heads change direction, orbiting one around the other. They diffuse a soft glow – the alchemist imagines that's what this odd thing the books called 'electricity' would have looked like. They're just energy, though, and it's such an odd pleasant change, to have his energy heal, not damage.

'They're very beautiful.' His companion smiles, watching the little bursts of light dance around each other. 'But we should get going soon – someone in the village must have noticed them by now.'

'I suppose you're right. We came close today.'
'The cats are restless. The strange glow confuses them.'

The voices fade as they wade through the grass, long-hanging branches parting for them and coming together as they passed.'

'You know, I actually really wanted to meet those two again. Let them know what happened.'

'What's the point? It'd complicate things, I feel. Besides, I feel the boy knows, somewhere deep in his soul.'

Slowly, the two shapes move deeper into the entwinement of trunks, and not a single blade of grass bends at their wake. Just as Karou is just about out of sight completely, the darker silhouette stops again.

'You really think Rai and Konoe would be fine?'

'I think, dear Leaks,' the ginger cat smiles, and he thinks that he's come to learn that no grief in the world has not been worth this. 'That you worry way too much, and always will have.'

He almost goes to tell Shui that he's always been far too reckless, and this is how we've come to this, but he bites back the notes of bitterness.

'I believe,' he treads instead, careful to choose his words, 'That you know of a remedy against the tendency to worry.'

The poet laughs, clear and joyful, before glancing over his shoulder to the valley where the village is hidden; hasty to clasp a hand over his mouth.

'I suppose you'd like to hear it? I'm always more than happy to, dear friend.'

As they walk on, a melody fills the air, a song that flows through his veins (he doesn't technically have veins any more but that's what Shui would say because it's poetic and poetry is almost like a
small science in itself); flows through the forest, healing any damage that still remains. In this moment, he is happy.

They haven't been seen for a while now, the two fleeting travellers, the phantoms of the forest. They're more of a bedtime story to tell by the campfire, or to the restless little ones that refuse to stay curled up after dark. They say one carries with him an instrument that makes music powerful enough to comfort the deepest wounds, to cure all illness, and the other – enough power to destroy all that lives and breathes, had he not loved this world so dearly. They move through the night and leave no trace, like devils, or like spirits with no body, never one without the other, golden in the light of great bursts of fire.

But if you're really lucky, or just really lost too close to the heart of the forest too late after dusk, you might see a light glow in the distance, pulsing and swaying, like a golden star that got caught in the fringe of pines. You should follow it, if you ever do, for it will lead you to safety no matter how far from home you are. You'll never catch up to it, but that's ok – otherwise where would all the fun be in a bit of mystery? Oh, and make sure you keep quiet – you might just hear the faintest melody resonate in the distance, and the ghost of laughter, rising up to the stars.

End Notes

p.s. @ mod, thank u so much for putting in the time and effort to organise this event!

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