Qui Sème Le Vent, Récolte La Tempête

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Summary

"So you sow, so shall you reap." Ren Kouha's first campaign as a general of the Kou Empire is supposed to be a successful one—until the Empress Gyokuen throws her own hand in. It is an uphill battle in an attempt to usurp her, and doubts within one's own family never bode well. Heavy focus within the Kou Empire, post chapter 167 extrapolation.
Chapter 1

Sometimes Koumei forgets just how much younger Kouha is.

It’s easy to forget that Kouha’s just eighteen, just barely an adult when he’s always been so much faster than everyone, so much more competent and lively and capable. It’s easy to forget when Kouha had marched off with that same grin on his face, totally confident as he rode off with his sword shining, eyes gleaming with the promise of battle.

It was easy to forget when he’d stormed back in, eyes gone berserk under the blood spattering his body, screaming at their stepmother that she’s circumvented his orders, she’d sent his men into a trap on purpose, she’d killed everyone, she’d ruined everything, and that he was going to kill her right now--

But it’s easy to remember when one word from Kouen shuts him up, douses his rage like a bucket of water on a match, and sends him to his room like a child.

Probably no one else will go to see him tonight, frightened of his rage. His most loyal, most dedicated servants had been among those slaughtered, Koumei has heard, and it’s only natural for him to creep down the halls, slumping against Kouha’s door with a knock. “Ha. It’s me.”

It’s a little bit easier to forget about being home, about coming home as a failure when Kouha has his head underwater and he can't hear or see or think about anything.

He's drained the water twice. Finally, it stays mostly clear, a little ruddy from the blood he's scrubbed from his hair, but it'll do. He drags his head above water for a moment, the mess of it sloshing against the sides of the tub just in time for him to hear the knock on his door.

Go away is on the tip of his tongue, and he exhales a slow, shuddery sigh as he drops his chin atop his knees. Then again, Mei didn't do anything wrong. Mei didn't laugh in his face at the news of his army being slaughtered, didn't practically tell him to shut up and go to his room like a five year old. "… Yeah. Come in."

Koumei would probably have come in anyway, after seeing Kouha’s face in the audience chamber. He opens the door, slowly drags a chair in front of it and under the knob to prevent anyone else from getting in, and sinks to his knees next to the tub, resting his hands on the sides. “It wasn’t your fault. You know that.”
"It was," he dully says, not lifting his head. "If I was half the general I should be, I could have still pulled them out alive."

“It was your first campaign.” Koumei trails a hand into the cooling water, watching the slight tinge of blood sink to the bottom. “You tried. It was her fault, if they’d been given only your orders you’d have won the day, and she’s doing it on purpose to try and break you. You’re a threat to her, Ha.”

"If that's true, then why won't En do anything about it?!" Kouha's head jerks up, his chest heaving. "Why wouldn't he let me kill her? I would have done it right then, in front of everyone, don't think I wouldn't have!"

“I know you could have. And I know you would have.” Koumei sinks down to sit cross-legged on the floor running a finger over a wet strand of red hair. “En’s got some long game in mind. Maybe he’d have had to sacrifice you to her followers, I don’t know. Maybe he knows more about what she can do than we do.” He shrugs. “We have to trust him.”

"So fucking sacrifice me. Like to see them try, anyway, I'll kill all of them." His arms hug tighter to his knees as his lower lip trembles. "It's a really stupid game if he can just watch so many of our people die." A huff, and he lifts one hand to angrily scrub it over his eyes. "R-really hate this. Hate her."

Sometimes, it's easy to remember how young Kouha really is.

“She’ll get hers,” he promises, and his eyes lid slightly, imagining a few more imaginative ends for Gyokuen that he and Kouha had brainstormed. “When En’s ready. Maybe he wants her to underestimate you.”

"Well, he sure as hell did a good job of making her do that today by sending me to my room like I'm a kid." Hot, angry tears well up again, and Kouha slinks down further into the water, no matter that it's getting cold. "Just gonna drown myself."

“At least wait until the slaves re-heat it,” Koumei says practically. “Come on, En doesn’t think you’re a kid. He gave you an army. And from what I heard you led it really well. If that bitch hadn’t interfered you’d be sitting in Laem right now with the Emperor’s severed head in your lap.”

Ugh. The reminder of it makes it impossible not to cry, and Kouha dunks his head entirely in an
attempt to keep his eyes from getting too red before he comes up again, sniffling. "Stupid. Even Judal panders to her, it's gross. H-how am I supposed to keep my mouth shut in court, I just want to kill her--"

“You know court games are beyond me.” Usually even attending court is beyond Koumei. “But if you don’t play the game, you let her win, don’t you? En needs to count on us, or at least you. We’re the only ones who don’t play both sides.”

"Hate this,” Kouha tiredly repeats, and with a last, angry swipe over his eyes, finally makes to drag himself out. "Throw me my robe or something, will you? I'm cold."

Koumei grabs the robe, and rubs Kouha down with a few quick pats of a towel before wrapping him in it. “You’re the only person I wait on,” he says with the barest hint of a smile, or what passes for one on his face.

"You're missing your calling," Kouha mumbles, huddling himself down into his robe and blowing a strand of damp hair out of his face. "You're lucky. En's not gonna make you go to war. I mean, it's what I wanted, but someone like you…” He trails off, a brief twinge of anxiety at the mere thought furrowing his brow. "If it had been you out there…” If I hadn't been able to keep you safe--

"Ugh. It was a mess, Mei."

Koumei huffs out a breath, ruffling the bangs in his face. “I asked En if I could go with you. He said he had something else for me to do, but he didn’t. He doesn’t think I can take care of myself.” I could take care of you, though. If she ever makes you cry again I’ll kill her myself. “I’ll ask him again before you leave.”

"No.” It makes him cold just thinking about it. "Even if he said yes, I'd tell him you were entirely useless deadweight and I don't want you to come."

“I’d try harder for you,” Koumei says, and sinks into one of the overstuffed love seats. “I hate thinking of you out there at her mercy. At least if she gave shitty orders I could countermand them and take the blame.”

"That's not the problem," Kouha sighs, scrubbing a hand through his hair as he flops down at the opposite end and drops his feet right into Koumei's lap. "It's bad enough that so many of our people died and I couldn't do anything about it, no matter how hard I tried. It's… if you were one of those, and I couldn't do anything…” A sardonic smile pulls at his lips. "Yeah, I'd never forgive myself."
“Don’t be dumb, I can take care of myself.” Koumei drops a hand down to Kouha’s leg, rubbing little patterns over it. “I mean, I don’t, but I can. Could. If I felt like it.” He assumes he could, at any rate. “If things got sticky I could always use my djinn.” For about twenty seconds, until he got tired.

"… Mei," is the weary reply as Kouha lets his head loll back and over the arm of the loveseat, "your djinn isn't good in combat at all, and you're a twig even though you just sit and eat and play in books and ink all day. You'd die. Just… take my word for it."

Koumei squeezes a foot affectionately. “Rather just give En his intelligence reports anyway. Don’t worry, I’m not suddenly developing a backbone. I just worry about you.”

"Yeah, well, as long as I don't have to worry about you, that's fine." Kouha wriggles his toes. "I've got a big sword, kills a lot of people."

“I like your big sword,” Koumei says with a nudge, pinching a toe. “I was hearing all kinds of reports about you. They called you the Red Scourge, how sexy is that?”

Okay, that makes him feel a little bit better. Koumei’s good at that, always has been. "I didn't get much of a chance to hear about the good stuff," Kouha admits, his eyes lidding.

Koumei’s voice turns dreamy, taking on the storytelling tone he’d always used to soothe Kouha to sleep at night with tales of fearsome warriors and their conquests. “We got messenger spells and pigeons from all over,” he murmurs, stroking down one slender leg. “People were panicking because you were coming, going to temples and locking themselves inside to pray to their heathen gods. One town offered to take En as their god if he’d keep you away.”

That definitely makes him feel better. "Really good," he breathes, stretching his legs out a bit more to let Koumei pet and stroke to his heart's content. "Guess En didn't take up that offer, because I sure as hell never got orders to stop. God, I was so close to Laem, too."

“En laughed in his face,” Koumei says dreamily, hands working up and down those legs. “Told him to pray to you, if he was so afraid. We heard the next day that you wiped that village off the map, god, I was so proud of you.”

Those are sore muscles Kouha didn't even realize he had, and ahh, it feels good for them to dissolve underneath his brother's touch. "Only good thing about you being there with me would be coming back to you—ahh, fuck, right there," Kouha sighs, scooting a bit closer. "And enjoying my victories
Koumei strokes a thumb down a tense calf, then up Kouha’s thighs. “That would be worth getting dressed in the morning for,” he breathes. “Worth going to war for. Battle still make you hard, little brother?”

"As much as talking about my conquests apparently makes you." Impossible not to wriggle a foot over and drag it between Koumei’s legs, really. "Does no one take care of you while I'm away?"

Koumei’s eyes lid, and he strokes a little higher up Kouha’s thigh, thighs parting at the touch of that wriggling foot. “Not like you do. And no one who’s a war hero.” Just the guards, and a couple particularly bad nights where he’d snuck into the city to a club he’s not supposed to know about, wrapped up in a disguise until he got what he needed.

_Hardly a war hero. War heroes come back with their armies safe and happy._

Kouha's mouth twists and he shoves that thought away. "Still the same old Mei, then," he murmurs, and he lurches up, making a grab for Koumei's robes to pull him closer. "I'm pretty tired," he breathlessly admits. "You wanna suck my cock? The girls don't do it like you do."

Koumei leans into his brother’s touch almost gratefully, nuzzling down against him before pawing open the front of his robe. “No one takes care of you like I do,” he agrees. _If they did, I'd kill them._ “Missed the taste of you.” He bends down, sighing through his nose as he closes his mouth around the tip of that familiar, flushed cock, slowly suckling it to hardness.

It's really, really good to be home again.

It's that, and even more so the fact that it's Koumei, his mouth slick and hot and perfect like it always is, making him hard so fast that he's lightheaded from the rush of blood going south. "You're such a slut," is the affectionate, ragged exhale to follow, and Kouha drags his fingers back through his brother's hair, twisting them down into the thick of it and scraping against his scalp as his hips lurch up, shoving further against Koumei's tongue. "Want me to choke you with it?" Kouha eagerly asks. "You always look so pretty with your mouth stuffed full."

Koumei’s purr around the cock in his mouth only gets louder at the filthy, degrading words, and he sucks eagerly, working his mouth down, pulling off only to murmur, “Choke me, make me cry, please let me cry for you,” before sliding back down, eyes half-lidded at the yank to his hair. He’s
already painfully hard at the musky taste leaking into his mouth, the fact that no one in the world
knows his mind like Kouha does, the fact that it’s his little brother pulling his strings so sweetly, so
cruelly.

If Koumei isn’t perfect, then no one is. Kouha shudders hard, fistng his hands tighter into his
brother’s hair, yanking as his hips thrust up, sliding long and hard over that hot, wet tongue, down
that perfect throat that spasms around him when he shoves in deep enough that Mei’s nose nuzzles
into his belly. "God, this is what you’re made for," he groans, twisting to better fuck into Koumei’s
mouth. "Listen to you, you sound like a messy whore."

Koumei gags hard, tears spilling down his face as he chokes for breath around Kouha’s cock, hands
squeezing Kouha’s thighs as he lets himself be jerked around and used, no better than any whore,
*worse* because he doesn’t even need money. These are the times he comes alive, the times he lives
for, when his life is in Kouha’s merciless hands. He looks up through bleary eyes as best he can,
dripping tears onto Kouha’s stomach as he chokes, cock so hard between his legs it *aches*, and that
only makes everything better.

If *anything* inspires him to have a little bit of energy, it’s Mei.

His mouth is so hot and slick and perfect, it’s hard not to lose himself just a few thrusts in. It takes
*effort* to pull out, to send Koumei sprawling onto his back on the loveseat, to crawl his way up with a
knee digging into his chest as he fists his own cock. "Love it when you’re such a slut, Mei," he pants
out, wrapping his other hand back up into his brother’s ponytail, yanking hard and holding his head
in place. "Love fucking you. No one sucks my cock like you, no one takes it like such a good
little bitch--ahh, god--" The hard shudder that rakes up his spine at that is too much to bear, and Kouha
grits his teeth as he comes, making *sure* to spill over Koumei’s face, dripping over his lashes and
cheeks and lips.

Koumei gasps for breath, face splotchy and bruised under the *mess*, licking hungrily at his lips for all
he can taste, not wanting to wipe it off yet because he *loves* the look and feel of Kouha’s come on his
face. “Love being a good bitch for you,” he groans, hands petting up Kouha’s thighs, hips rutting up
helplessly into the air. “I love it when you put me in my place, god, no one fucks me like you.”

On top of him now, Kouha looks every inch the war hero, the maddened general, with blood in his
senses and victory on his mind, and Koumei shivers, longing to be conquered thoroughly by that
power.

"You’re my bitch," Kouha breathes in affirmation, grinning as he wriggles back, grinding the curve
of his ass down against Koumei’s cock. "Mmnn, one reason I wish I *could* bring you with me--after
every battle I won, I’d come back and fuck you senseless. *Everyone* could hear you screaming, tents
don’t muffle a damn thing."
“You could parade me around after,” Koumei murmurs, eyes alight at the idea of it, rocking up against Kouha’s ass with a little shudder. “Hold meetings with me on my knees next to you, where I belong.” God, he’s so hard, and the words aren’t helping, either his own or Kouha’s.

That mental image isn’t fair. It goes straight to his cock, no matter how he’s already come once, and it’s with a groan that Kouha wriggles back, shoving Koumei’s legs apart and robes up and out of the way. "Be glad I have good stamina, or I’d be pissed off that you made me come so fast already when I want to fuck you,” he growls, eyes flickering about for a bottle of oil--ah, to hell with it. Koumei can walk for a limp afterwards, he’ll love it. He spits on his hand, swiping it over his hardening cock. "Look how hard you are. You gonna be able to stand it, or are you going to come the second I shove it in you?"

“I’m not sure,” Koumei admits, spreading his legs eagerly. Kouha doesn’t fuck him very often, and it’s been ages since he’s been home. “What will you do to me if I come fast?” Sometimes Kouha’s punishments are the best part about going to bed with him, leaving him trembling and sobbing and used, bleeding and bruised in creative places and as hard as he can ever remember being--but sometimes they’re too cruel, leaving him alone for too long, grabbing his balls and squeezing too tight for good pain, or simply Kouha being disappointed in him. “I’ll be good, I’ll do what you want, just fuck me raw, Ha--”

Fucking hell, but Koumei is going to make him come again before he even gets his cock in. He huffs out a hot breath, digging his nails into one, creamy white thigh, splaying his brother's legs open wider as he guides his cock to that tight, twitching little hole. "If you come before I say you can," he pants out, eyes rolling back when the head of his cock presses inside, that first, initial shove too tight, too tense, "ah… fuck, I'm gonna shove your face to the floor and really fuck you like a dog.” One hand jerks up, slapping the side of Koumei's face as Kouha shoves his way in the last few inches, gritting his teeth. "Relax, or you're going to hurt me, you slut."

Damn, but that’s a good punishment, and it’s a good thing too, because there’s no way Koumei’s going to last long when Kouha shoves into him like that, too dry, too fast, and Koumei’s whole body trembles with it. He doesn’t want to relax, he wants it to hurt, wants to feel it a week from now, but an order is an order, and he takes a deep gulp of breath, relaxing a bit with his thighs spread wide open. “Fuck me,” he hiccups, leaning into every cruel touch. “Fuck me, fuck me like your whore, fuck--”

It’s too much even now, and he lets out a dry sob as he comes hard over his own stomach, eyes gone dark as his vision blacks out.

Yeah, this is definitely why he likes coming home.
Kouha languidly grins, exhaling a long, hot breath as he simply hauls Koumei off of him by the hair, tossing his limp body to the floor like a rag doll. He drags a hand up his brother's stomach, using the slick, dripping mess of his come to make his own cock a bit slicker as he shoves back in with a grunt. "Wake up, Mei," he croons, fistiing a hand back into his brother's hair to haul him back onto his cock. "Need you at least half-way coherent to be a good hole for me."

“I’ll be good,” Koumei mumbles, only half-conscious at first, waking up with Kouha’s hand in his hair. “Y-yeah, just like that.” He swallows hard, hands fistiing against the floor, feeling the slick slide of Kouha inside him. “F-fuck me with my own seed, god, you have the best cock, I’ll be a good hole for you,” he promises breathlessly, clenching down no matter how he tries to relax, too delighted at being impaled over and over again to do anything but behave.

It's good feeling Koumei squeeze around him now that it's a bit slicker, and Kouha groans, releasing his brother's hair with a shove downward to better grab hold of his hips and hold him still while he fucks him. Each thrust is deep, harder still than the last, not particularly caring about being precise when Koumei's already come on his cock and is just a shuddering thing underneath him, and that's the best, when he can just fuck him however the hell he wants. "Whore," he affectionately mutters, and one hand slides up, kneading roughly, possessively into the curve of Koumei's ass before his hand cracks across it, hard enough to immediately leave a red handprint. "You're gonna be all bruised up tomorrow. All fucked up. I'm gonna watch you while you try and sit still, you'll just be squirming."

Koumei’s cock twitches back to life at that slap, at the knowledge that it’s for Kouha’s pleasure to hurt him, not for his own, and that makes everything so much better. He presses his cheek down onto the floor, a ragged moan coming from his mouth as he shoves weakly back into every thrust. “All fucked up,” he agrees breathlessly. “Won’t be able to sit down for a week if you keep spanking me like that.”

One of his hands comes up to his ear and the earring Kouha had thrust through it years ago, tugging and twisting, getting off on the memory of that pain as hard as on the current pounding of Kouha deep inside him and the burning of that handprint on his ass. “You should--pierce something else,” he groans, sagging forward against the floor at the mere thought.

Koumei is definitely trying to kill him.

He has to grit his teeth to keep from coming just at that thought, and the next slap is harder, the knead of his fingers into the reddened skin afterwards that much rougher, and Kouha's fingers dig into his brother's hips hard enough to bruise there, too, as he hauls him back, hissing out a breath at how deep he slides inside. "Y-yeah? Maybe," Kouha pants out, leaning forward, a hand scrabbling its way up Koumei's chest to pinch and pull at a nipple through his robes, "I'll shove a slave's ring through here later. Then you'll really--be as low as a whore--"
He comes hard, muffling his cries into Koumei’s back, far from gentle as he shoves his cock in as deep as he can and grinds against his brother’s ass with every pulse and twitch that rakes through him. "God," he groans, sagging forward. "You're… not fucking fair."

“Your slave.”

The words are raw and ragged, forced out of a hoarse throat as Koumei trembles, sagging down onto his face on the floor. “I'll be...such a good slave for you…” he can barely breathe, barely think, mind as full as his ass. “You can brand me too,” he mutters, “put it all over me so everyone can see, keep me naked and beat me when you're horny...god, please, I…”

He’s a little lost, only gets like this sometimes when it’s hard to get out of that mindset, only lets himself go this far with Kouha.

Ahh, Koumei better not let himself get like this when he's away. That would make Kouha a little upset--less out of any jealousy, more out of worry that anyone else would take it too far and do something stupid and hurt his brother beyond repair. "Yeah, you'd be an awfully pretty slave," he murmurs, stroking a soothing hand up Koumei's spine as he pulls out with a wince. Even he's sore after all that. "You already are though, aren't you? Don't need a ring or brand to prove it. Though… the ring was a fun idea. Come up here," he adds as he drags himself back onto the loveseat, snuggling back into his robe and hauling Koumei up by the arm. "Wanna play with your hair, you can relax now, you did really good."

Koumei shudders deeply, blinking tears away as he slowly comes back to himself. He nods, not entirely sure what he's agreeing with, and lets Kouha drag him up to the loveseat, curling arms around him like a stuffed animal. “Good, good. You're...good.”

"Really good," Kouha cheerfully corrects, threading his fingers through Koumei's hair and tugging his hair tie loose in the process. He's already messed the whole thing up anyway, might as well pet and play with it properly. "You're always so perfect, Mei. No one is as fun to play with as you. I'm really glad to be home and with you."

Another long slow breath, and Koumei feels more like himself again, raw and empty, but so, so much better than before. “You too.” Yeah, he can say words now. “Ugh, I let that go too long. Was waiting for you, thank you.”

"Ahh, I'm glad to hear that, really. I'd be upset if you let someone else see you like that." It's one
thing that Koumei lets other people fuck him and hurt him. That's fine. It's something else entirely when he gets... well, like that. "They don't know how to take care of you, anyway," Kouha grumbles, plucking at a few strands of his brother's hair to begin braiding it. "Not worth your time."

“Mmm. Don’t let anyone see me like that but you.” Koumei butts his head against Kouha’s hands, sleepily content now, and secretly delighted at the way Kouha is thinking of something, anything other than the scene in the audience chamber. “They’re only good for faceless stuff. Sometimes I need it faceless.”

"Yeah, I get that." Kinda like how random girls are fun, too, for kicks. They don’t like being slapped around so much, which is fine, so he doesn’t, but putting his dick in something on a cold night is still nice, when he’s in the middle of the desert. "Want me to grab a slave to run you a bath? Or do you wanna stay like this a bit longer?"

“If you’re gonna run me a bath,” Koumei says slowly, stroking up and down Kouha’s arm, “make sure it’s one of my slaves. I don’t trust the others, they could be working for her. I love what we do, but I’m not going to help her hurt En no matter what.”

"Fuck that, I'll run it myself," Kouha mutters, not in the mood to slink around and avoid En while looking for specific people. Koumei’s right, of course; Gyoukuen would eat this sort of thing up, spread rumors far and wide and ugh, how annoying would it be if En made either of them to marry just to make the rumor mill calm down a bit? "Does he fuck her?" he can’t help but ask, no matter how it makes him gag. "God, imagine those babies. Grooooss."

Koumei gags a little. “At least you’re not here when she’s trying to work her charm on him. She tried it on me once, disgusting. I can’t wait until he’s done playing whatever game he’s running and just kills her. Good thing he’s not one for making bastards.”

Okay, that image makes him outright laugh. "She doesn't try with me. Probably too young for her tastes, old hag. Ahh, I wish I could have seen your face, though."

“She’s an idiot if she thinks I’m a better bet than you,” Koumei says with a roll of his eyes. “I don’t doubt my face looked like that time we tried eating in the city and I got half a mouse in my kebab.”

Kouha fairly cackles. "It's good that she doesn't hit on me, though. I'd threaten to shove my sword down her throat. You know, my actual sword."
At that mental image, a little shiver of anticipation goes through Koumei. “I’d love to see that. I love watching you swing that thing around, especially through her. I wish I knew what dark spell she wove on Father.”

“No telling, considering she’s Al-Sarmen's witch,” Kouha mutters, sighing as he plucks and toys with Koumei’s hair. "You know, the Kou Empire did just fine before we had to answer to them all the time.”

“Mm, but now we get to learn new and interesting ways of manipulation,” Koumei says, bored even with the sarcasm in his own tone. “En’s playing a dangerous game. He thinks he’s using them, they think they’re using him. One of them’s wrong, and they’ve been around for a long time.”

“… Not to mention Judal, who’s a bloody idiot and thinks along the same lines,” Kouha sighs, shaking his head. "See, this is why I start freaking out when En calls me off when it comes to that witch. What if he goes to her side and we just don't know it?"

Koumei’s heart beats a little faster for a moment. “Careful,” he warns, voice as calm and sleepy as ever. “Know what you’re saying if you talk about doubting him. I’m not saying don’t do it, but be careful.” After a second, his hand tightens on Kouha’s. “We’re going to have to make a choice, you know.”

"Not sure what there's left to choose other than this empire, one way or another," Kouha mutters, his fingers squeezing tight around Koumei's. "I'm not doubting him. I just… wish he'd be a little more open with us, at least, with his plans."

“So do I.” Kouha sighs, shrugging. “Maybe he’s testing our loyalty, I don’t know. He wouldn’t have done that before, but he’s so wrapped up in their games now it’s hard to tell. No matter what, I’ll always be with you, all right? You know you can count on me.”

"Yeah." And that makes it a little easier to breathe, when it comes down to it. "And I'll make sure to keep you safe, no matter what. We make a pretty good team, at the end of the day."

“If we can ever leave the bed,” Koumei says dryly. “Hey, we conquered that dungeon, didn’t we? And no one thought I could.”

“… Yeeeah, I kinda walked you through that one. Don't give yourself too many shoulder pats.”
“You didn’t walk me, I had to walk myself. It was a really long way. You just took care of all the danger.”

"I'm starting to be glad we just have the same father. You had to inherit your innate ability to just flop on your back all the time and do nothing else from your mother."

“I thought you liked me on my back.”

"Not in a dungeon. Where's your sense of adventure, anyway?"

“Ugh, I’m rich, I don’t need one. I have servants for that.” Koumei reaches up, touching the earring Kouha had pierced him with and feeling the seal of Solomon inscribed there. “I don’t see what’s so good about going places when you’re just going to come back anyway.”

"So laaazy, Mei," Kouha sighs out, flopping backwards. "I'll learn from your example, then. You can just stay a mess all night, I'm not getting up to draw you a bath. Too comfy right now."

Koumei’s cock gives a half-hearted twitch at that. “I like it when you leave me messy all night,” he murmurs, and curls an arm around his brother, pulling him close.

"Good," Kouha murmurs, snuggling up against him. "Maybe you'll still be all slick inside when we wake up, hmm?" he adds wickedly, tilting his head up nip lightly at that earring. "We can have more fun."

Koumei shivers. “You should take me in my sleep,” he breathes, tightening his arm. “Whether I want you to or not.”

You always want it, you slut. "Maybe I will. It'll be a surprise," Kouha sighs, wriggling closer. "After I get some good sleep."

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It's a pity that when he wakes, Kouha doesn't exactly feel like making use of the warm body wrapped around him.
Sorry, Mei, he thinks, swinging his legs over the side of the loveseat that they ended up passed out on. Too lazy to make it even to bed in the end--Mei is rubbing off on him. Kouha heaves a slow, quiet sigh, raking a hand back through his hair and trying not to think about how normally, his three favorite servants would be already fighting it out for the privilege of brushing his hair, or helping him dress--

There's those stupid, angry tears again that always well up the moment he recalls, all too vividly, the exact moment their bolg ran out and he couldn't do a damned thing to save them.

Can't let that happen again.

It's early, and Koumei won't roll himself out of bed for some time. Better that way--it gives him a little time to slip off without his advice and chiding ringing in his ears. Kouha dresses quickly and silently, opting for more formal attire, considering the door he's going to be knocking on that morning. God, he doesn't even want to know what he looks like, truth be told. The aches and pains he's been ignoring are out full force in the early morning, his sword arm a constant, nagging throb, his legs aching and tired, and he's got a crick in his neck that he wishes he still had a pretty servant to work out--

Kouha twists a quick braid through a few strands of hair before slipping out of his chambers. En has to speak to him, he just has to. He's calmer now, and he'll behave and everything. At least, that's what Kouha tells himself as he knocks on his eldest brother's study, trying not to wrench the door off of its hinges already.

It will be Kouha, of course.

Kouen straightens his back, hearing a couple pops and cracks that hadn’t been there ten years ago. Very well, he’d known he’d have to have this conversation sooner or later. “Leave us,” he says quietly, and Hakuei slips out the back door, by now used to these moments. “Kouha. Come in.”

Kouha tries not to be a little too fast in opening the door, tries even more to remember to bow once he's inside and it's shut properly behind him. "En--ah, Your Highness." He's got to remember titles better than this one of these days, but it's a little difficult when he calls his other older brother that outranks him a slut on a daily basis. "I'm sorry if I'm interrupting anything, but I needed to speak with you."

Kouen waves a hand. “I assumed you were coming eventually, though I take it Koumei managed to
placate you for this long. Have a seat.” He pulls a second cup out of a drawer, and stands to pour the tea, sitting afterwards behind his own steaming cup. “Is it to ask me questions that you have come, or to shout at me?”

It's difficult not to feel like a seven year old again, barely capable of swinging a sword, when Kouen talks to him like that. Kouha feels his cheeks flush, and he sits, staring at the steam of his own cup rather than drink. "I didn't mean to shout at you. I was… just really upset."

“Understandable.” Kouen picks up his own cup, eyes narrowed to slits as he watches Kouha over the rim. “Do you trust me, Kouha?”

Kouha blinks at that question. "Yes. Of course I do, En--Your Highness--I just--" He frowns, dropping his gaze again as his brow furrows. "I don't understand why you would let her do that. Those were our people, and a lot of them, that she sent to their deaths. I hadn't had a single casualty prior to her overriding my orders, so why? You had to have known she was doing it."

“There is a longer game at work here. It isn’t your fault you can’t see it, of course.” He doubts anyone can. Hakuei can see some, Koumei another part, Gyoukuen more than he wants her to, but none of them can see as far as endgame, not like he can. “Trust me, if you can, when I say that for the moment, it was necessary. You’ll have another army, eventually.”

"Eventually?" Don't get angry. Don't get upset. Kouha sucks in a slow, steadying breath. "Maybe if you explained it to me, just a little more--you know I trust you, but--"

Kouen raises an eyebrow. “It was necessary, for the moment. What more do you need to know?” If Kouha is developing a rebellious streak, he’ll need to do something about--no, no, Kouha is loyal, simply upset. And his brother, for what that’s worth. He gives in, just a little. “You were very useful in the field. But I need you somewhere else soon, and when our Empress made a suggestion,” don’t forget the walls have ears, little brother, “I felt it was prudent to heed her advice.”

"You felt it was prudent." There's no stopping the way his voice shakes now from ill-concealed rage. His fingers curl against his knees, fistng into his robes. "She killed all of my men. She killed my servants, which were some of the strongest magicians we had, and you felt that was prudent? What could possibly be more important than me leading us to victory in Laem?! No one is going to want to serve under me after this, En! She made me come home a disgrace and it wasn't my fault!"

"Laem is not the end.” Kouen takes a sip of tea. “One campaign does not make a war, little brother. Not every enemy will always be in front of you, and one failure does not make you a bad commander. It’s time you learned this. Not everything you’re blamed for will always be your fault."
And once you are no longer in disgrace, you will have an army again.”

One of his hands slams down onto the table. "I don't want another army if it means she'll just send them to their deaths, too! Why are you pandering to her? Why won't you tell us anything?"

“You forget your place.” The words come out sharp and cold, and Kouen’s eyes harden. “If you are going to act so much a fool upon your return, then perhaps you weren’t truly ready for this command in the first place. Maybe I will give it to Koumei instead.”

Kouha wants to scream.

En was never like this before Al-Sarmen, before that witch, and it makes him want to claw at his hair in frustration, makes him want to reach over and shake his eldest brother. Instead, it's the thought of Koumei being dragged into war because of his too-sharp tongue that makes him sit back and shut up, teeth gritted as he glares down into his tea. "My apologies, Your Highness." It's torture, trying to grind out the words and not snarl. "The only reason I ask is because I want to better help."

Kouen folds his hands, looking at Kouha through the steam, settling back into his chair. “I need to be able to count on you, Kouha. I need you,” he says carefully, eyes darting to the door and windows more for Kouha’s benefit, to intimate that there are always people listening, “to be more than people expect you to be. I need you to be as smart and capable as Mei and I know you are.”

Kouha doesn't care if there are people listening. God dammit, there are ways around that. Let me kill them, kill them yourself, we can go out and pretend to conquer a dungeon, something, anything. "I am all of that, En," he desperately tries again, leaning forward. "I just want to help, just tell me what you need me to do." "

“I need you,” Kouen says, with a hint of steel in his voice now, “to do as you’re told. Behave and be a good little prince in disgrace. Take some new servants, slap them around until you feel better. Wait for my instructions.”

There's no stopping the way his lower lip trembles. "You're not being fair. I've done nothing but follow your orders so far, why am I being the one punished for all of this?"

“Because I need you to be.” Kouen looks up, holding his eyes. “Or are you only loyal when it brings you praise?”
"I don't need praise, I just--"

*This would be so, so much easier if I knew to what end this would bring us.*

It's no use. Looking at Kouen is proof to that, clear as day, and Kouha swallows hard, looking away after another moment. "Fine. I'll do as you say."

“Good. Go on, then. When I have need of you, I'll send for you.” Kouen drains his teacup, then picks up a sheaf of reports, already starting to scan them.

Kouha tries *very hard* not to slam the door on his way out.

Not as much can be said for his bedroom door, and the force with which he yanks it closed makes his arm start throbbing all over again. His bed, at least, doesn't take as much punishment--except for the pillow that he grabs to scream into before he can rip it to shreds.

Koumei gives him space.

He hears it when Kouha storms back into his room, just as everyone in the palace must, and the most he can be grateful for is that Kouha hasn't used his djinn. That would be *really* unsafe, is threatening at the best of times, and right now would probably tear the palace down around their ears.

Koumei waits, busying himself as much as he cares to with reports from his men, compiling them for Kouen and sending them off after a few hours, then letting his servants dress him and send him down to Kouha’s room. He slinks inside, not bothering to knock, and simply sits on the floor, reading through his papers.

"I hate them." The words are muffled, a little raw around the edges and punctuated with a sniff even though Kouha doesn't lift his head from where he's curled up in bed around a pillow. "Really hate all of them. How hard would she be to assassinate, you think?"

“I’ve offered.” Koumei shuffles his papers, making a note on one of them with a charcoal stick. “I don’t think it would be that hard, but En told me to wait. Says there’s more at work here.” He sighs, making a lazily vicious line through a word. “I don’t know what to think anymore. It just comes down to trusting him."
"He told me to be a good little prince in disgrace--" Kouha wrenches up another pillow, throwing it as hard as he can into the wall where it explodes into feathers. "Told me to just 'get new servants'--I don't want new ones! The ones I had were good and loyal, no one is going to even want to work for me!"

Koumei winces. That had been tactless of En, they all know how Kouha is with his servants. Putting him in disgrace is bad enough when he’d done so well, but to take away the people closest to his friends? “People die in war,” he says quietly. “They’ll still want to work for you, you’re a prince. I’ll give you some of mine if you want.”

"I don't want them to work for me because I'm a prince." His face fucking hurts. Maybe one of these days he’ll stop crying, but it’s not going to be right now. "And yours are scared of me, I don't want them either. Mine shouldn't have died in the first place, no one should have, why isn't En more upset?"

“He doesn’t see them anymore.” That’s the explanation Koumei’s come up with, over the last several months. “He doesn’t ride out there anymore, he just sees them as numbers on the ledgers I hand him, or pieces on his chessboard. He doesn’t know any of them. And…” Koumei hesitates, then closes his eyes for a moment, extending the power of his djinn. It’s useless in combat, and takes time to drain a human of magoi, but works fine to sap any listening spells in the room. “I think he sees us as the same, lately.”

"… But we're his brothers." Kouha lifts his head, sniffling and scrubbing at his face before blinking red-eyed over at Koumei. "We're the ones most loyal to him, how can we just be a number on a page?"

“Because when you’re Kouen,” Koumei says slowly, “loyalty just means numbers you can count on. I’m not saying he’s like that all the time, but when he retreats to his planning sessions after War Councils...he comes up with things you never would if you’re thinking about human lives instead of ledgers. More and more, lately. I don’t know if it’s that witch or if it’s them, but it’s more and more.”

"I want to kill her." His voice is steady when he says that, at least. "She's a part of them, killing her will give them less hold over the empire and En, don't you think?"

“Maaaaybe.” Koumei tucks his knees under himself, thinking. “It would be a statement. You know that, right? We might go to war against Al-Sarmen.”
"Good. Maybe they'll go away too, then. They're messing with En and making him like this. I at least thought they wanted him in charge—that's why they gave him Judal."

Koumei snorts. “And look how well that turned out. He almost tipped our hand, sent Sindria against us before we were ready, and lost us a little sister besides. But if you get En involved in a war he doesn’t want, he’ll do worse than put you in disgrace, Ha.”

"We haven't lost Gyoku, she's just… well, she's a girl, girls are silly." Kouha sighs, rolling over onto his back to stare at the ceiling. "I just hate sitting here and doing nothing. That bitch needs to die already, I don't understand what end game En is going for."

“If you don’t understand it,” Koumei says slowly, “you probably shouldn’t try to change it. We trust him, right?” Please say yes. I don’t want to do this without you, it’s hard enough with you and I’m not sure I’d even stay if you turned. “He’s always been hard to read, hasn’t he? But things work out fine in the end.”

"Before, there wasn't Al-Sarmen to deal with." Kouha pulls a pillow over his face. "They're the ones I don't trust."

“But they teamed up. They’re on the same side now, for better or worse.” Koumei shrugs. “If you attack them, you’re against him, in his eyes. Just…think it through, and let me know if you’re going to do anything, all right? I’m trying to keep you safe.”

Kouha's mouth twists, unseen. "… I'm not going to do anything. I'm being a good little prince in disgrace, remember?" He's going to start crying again at this rate. "I just really fucking hate them."

“So do I.” The effort of suppressing the magic in the room wears on him, and Koumei lets it go with a sigh. “It won’t be so bad if you stay in the palace, you know. No one here is going to say anything about it.”

"Yeah, because I really love sitting cooped up in my room all day when I'm home in the Imperial City for once." Kouha slowly rolls toward the edge of the bed. "Can I just quit? What's that thing Judal always does… wraps himself up like a worm or something."

“If you start taking advice for how to deal with difficult situations from Judal,” Koumei warns, “you’re going to have a lot bigger problems than not telling which end you’re shitting out of like a worm.” This is a hard day. He slumps over, abandoning his papers for now.
"Gross." A thump, and Kouha hits the ground on top of one of his pillows. "I should try and talk to Hakuei. They're definitely fucking nowadays."

“Yeah.” Koumei scoots slowly over, nudging his head against Kouha’s shoulder. “Better her than the witch. At least Hakuei won’t try to stick a knife in him when he’s sleeping.”

Kouha rolls over a bit more, flopping himself on top of his brother. "Yeah, Hakuei's fine. What if he actually gets her pregnant? That'd be funny, I wanna see Hakuryuu's face."

“If he even can.” It’s not something they talk about much, but Koumei’s at the end of his patience with En’s treatment of their little brother. “Maybe with Paimon his seed will actually be able to take hold for once.”

Well, since Koumei said it--"At this rate, it's gonna be my bastards taking over the empire," he snickers, butting his face into Koumei's neck. "En should go out and campaign again for once, all that sitting at his desk and playing with maps is what makes his balls freeze over."

Koumei can’t help but smirk at that. “Not true, I was on campaign with him his first time. Left a trail of broken hearts behind, but nothing else.” Ah, it’s mean of him to talk like this, but En made Kouha cry. “Well, and a couple broken bones. He used to get so angry when he was out there.”

Kouha rolls his eyes. "Broken hearts' my ass, he's so awkward when it comes to girls. I know, I've bedded a few of the same ones. They're either scared or want to just lie there. Boring, how does he even get off?"

“He has weird taste,” Koumei agrees. “He doesn’t know how to talk about what he wants and gets angry when they don’t give it to him. He used to do the same to his generals back then--ah, you don’t remember Partevia, you must have been five or six.”

"… I'm going to feel sorry for Hakuei if she does end up pregnant. Think he'll actually marry her?" Kouha shifts, propping his head up into his hands. "And no, I don't remember Partevia very much. Remember, they tried to keep me all locked up and protected, which was funny because I just wanted to go practice sword fighting with En."

“That’s because Father's other bastards were sickly,” Koumei reminds him. “Only you and Gyoku lived past three, that’s why he brought you to the palace.” He reaches a hand out, combing through
soft pink strands with his fingers. “I wouldn’t be surprised if your sons were emperors one day.”

Kouha sticks out his tongue at that. "That implies I'm gonna get married. What woman's gonna put up with me like you do?"

“A masochistic one. Come on, you know En’s going to make you get married sooner or later.” Koumei tugs gently. “He’s already doing it to me, parading girls around while you’re gone and threatening me out of the corner of his mouth.”

"I think En needs to worry about making babies of his own and less about where our dicks are going," Kouha mutters, turning his head to nip at Koumei's fingers before kissing the same spots. "You'd be an awful husband, much better wife."

Koumei shivers at the scrape of Kouha’s teeth, almost melting down onto the floor. “Being a wife is boring, you have to clean and stuff. I’ll just be that crazy uncle that never leaves his room except when you come home.”

"Rich wives don't have to clean. Whatever wife I end up with better not be boring, I'll go insane if she's some vapid thing." That makes him shudder. "Alliance marriages, though."

“Mmm, what if she screams and cries the first time you hit her?” Koumei asks dreamily, rubbing his face against Kouha’s shoulder. “How will you make sons to take over the Empire then?”

"I sleep with plenty of girls that don't like being hit," Kouha mutters, giving Koumei's hair a little tug. "It's just more fun if they do like it. Hey, don't get all touchyfeely right now, you don't want me to play with you, trust me."

Koumei rolls over onto his back, running a finger down Kouha’s arm. “You sure? Might help you relive stress, and you were really good to me yesterday, I can handle you.”

"If I start hurting you, I don't think I'm gonna be able to stop," Kouha bluntly replies, his eyes lidding. "Then it's not fun anymore. I like you in one piece, you know."

Koumei sighs. “Yeah, all right. You should blow something up, let that djinn of yours out to play. Doesn’t he make you antsy when you don’t use him for a while?” Inwardly, his own djinn shivers at the thought.
"I used him plenty the other day." Kouha rolls off and to the side, flopping onto his back. "I don't even feel like blowing things up. I just… ugh. I hate everything."

Koumei's eyes lid. He's laying down, that happens more often than not, and he yawns. "When's the last time you ate something?"

Ah. His stomach definitely growls at that. "Uhh… good question." He sort of traveled really long and fast and then got here and screamed at people and yeah, food. Who has time for food. "That stupid Magi didn't clean the kitchens out again, did he?"

"Nah, he's been messing around with Hakuryuu lately, they went out into the desert for some fucking reason. You want me to have something brought to you?"

"Maybe they're fucking. And nah, I'll get up and get it," Kouha sighs, rolling a bit more before forcing himself to sit up. "You look comfortable. At least pass out on my bed this time, geez."

"Why?" Koumei almost manages the energy to roll over, but loses motivation halfway through and flops back down to his stomach. "m'fine here. Eat a lot, okay? And stop talking about gross things, you'll turn my stomach."

"Well, as long as you're happy," Kouha grumbles, reaching over to give his brother's ponytail a tug before heaving himself to his feet. Ah, he probably looks like shit. Maybe flirting with some of the kitchen staff will make him feel a little better, at least. "Have a good nap, Mei." It's inevitable, anyway.
Chapter 2

Koumei wants to sleep, sure. He always wants to sleep. But some things are more important, or at least more pressing. He levers himself slowly off the floor, pulling his robes around him against the chill of the hallways, and makes his way slowly down to Hakuei’s room.

It’s odd, that she should have a room here. He can remember easily when they’d all go to his uncle’s manor, all of them playing in the garden, always devolving into snowball fights in winter under General Kouen and General Hakuren, before everything got so complicated. He had been the best at packing the snowballs, handing them up at a rapid pace to Kouen’s perfect aim, grabbing Kouha back whenever he’d tried to make an ill-advised run on the enemy fortress, as the girls tried to convince Hakuei to stop playing with the boys and come have tea.

It really hadn’t been that long ago.

He knocks, sighing with the effort of the memory. “Hakuei? It’s Koumei.”

It takes but a moment for the door to open, Hakuei’s eyebrows lifted in mild surprise. It must be something pressing if Koumei has come to her door in person. "Koumei," she easily greets with a bow of her head, stepping back to let him enter. "To what do I owe this visit today? I expected you to be far more busy calming your brother down.

“You’re smart enough to know why I’m here.” Koumei folds his hands inside the sleeves of his robe, looking up at her through his bangs. “You’re the only person he’ll listen to. Can you get him to apologize to Kouha? For letting his servants get killed if nothing else?”

Immediately, she winces, turning partially away. "I think you know as well as anyone that making En do something--especially apologize--is nigh impossible."

“He’s got to do something. And we both know he doesn’t listen to me.” He doesn’t listen to anyone, not anymore, not except Hakuei and maybe Al-Sarmen. “I know he has a plan, I trust him, but Kouha’s just a kid. And he’s really upset.”

Hakuei hesitates visibly. “… I can’t make him apologize, but I can at least try and make him lighten up a bit,” she eventually says, glancing back to her cousin. "But you need to make sure Kouha calms down and doesn’t throw any more tantrums, no matter how justified. You know it just frustrates En.”
"I’m trying. Believe me. I thought I had him calmed, down, but…” Probably best not to say he was gone when I woke up. It’s all well and good for Kouen to bed his cousin, apparently, but he doubts that extends to him and Kouha. “Let’s just try to keep them apart, can we? I don’t want anything else messing up En’s plans.”

"That would probably be best.” She sighs, smoothing her robes. "Well, I'll go and speak to him now, then. Better sooner rather than later. Please do let Kouha know that I sympathize; there is a reason so many people are so loyal to him, after all."

“I know. Doubtless that has something to do with En’s plan, somehow, whatever it is,” Infuriating. He remembers when En had been so much easier to read. “Why?” he can’t help but wonder. “Why did he have to do that to Kouha? Was it all about that wi--I mean, Gyoukuen? Or was it to teach Kouha something? I just…” He huffs out a breath, ruffling his bangs. “I don’t get it and I don’t like it.”

"Koumei." It's a sort of wry, gentle chide. "I will find out what I can. I am aware that my mother is… less than pleasant to deal with. Believe me, it is a conversation En and I have had a dozen times over. Lately, he has just been… preoccupied. There are a lot of wars brewing, and it is difficult for him to be here and not in the thick of it as he usually is. I doubt it has anything to do with Kouha specifically--merely that he was the one unlucky enough to fall in the way."

“Then I will count myself as lucky that I wasn’t the one to fall in my brother’s way by carrying out his orders,” Koumei says quietly, the closest thing to angry he ever gets with Kouen. “Thank you. Even though I don’t expect you to accomplish anything.” He leaves, mind dark with predictions, moving the pieces around the globe the way Kouen does, and for once seeing every piece swept off the board as someone’s little brother.

Hakuei really can't blame him for being upset.

Truth be told, she wants to shake Kouen as much as the two brothers do, undoubtedly. Whether or not her mother was involved, it was a mistake to wound Kouha's reputation and pride, and as Koumei so bluntly pointed out--he's still a child, hardly older than Hakuryuu, and at that age, to see him coming back covered in blood after witnessing so much death…

Of course, she can't say all of that outright. It's a surefire way to make Kouen shut down and tell even her to shut up. Better to suggest things and let him make the decisions, even if it's a far more delicate process.
Hakuei slips around through the back entryway to Kouen's study, forgoing a knock in favor of sidling close to his chair and leaning forward, just enough to let her hair brush against one of his shoulders. "You should rest your eyes, or those maps are going to start blurring together."

“They did that three candles ago.” Kouen reaches a hand up, winding a finger around the lock of hair brushing against his shoulder. He rubs at his eyes, pushing the maps away for the time being, relaxing back until his head butts against Hakuei’s stomach. “Who is it that came to you and begged you to change my mind about something today?”

Hakuei’s lips curve into a small smile, and her hand lifts to slowly brush through his hair. "Koumei," she forwardly admits. There’s no use in lying, and it only serves to make a situation worse with Kouen, anyway. He doesn't tolerate deception very well, never has. "But you say that as if I didn't want to enjoy your company regardless."

Unusual, that Koumei would stir from his role to be so bold. Kouha must be more upset than he’d realized, and that could be a grave oversight. Kouen sighs, the headache starting to throb again. “Sit with me? Just for a little while.”

Rather than pull up a chair, Hakuei sidles around to neatly deposit herself upon his knee, scooting back a bit until her back nestles against his chest. "You have stress lines right here," she says, lifting a hand to gently poke between his knitted brows. "We could go to the city tonight, if it would help you relax."

One strong arm curls around her waist, and even just the smell of her hair, the soft warm weight of her on his knee, helps him to breathe. “Your presence helps me. I’m simply...weary. More weary than tense. It’s as if no one understands how difficult it is to keep everything balanced. I have to be able to count on some things. Was I wrong, to think Kouha could handle this?” It’s a weighted question, and one he wouldn’t normally ask, but this is a family matter more than a war matter.

Hakuei hums, nestling back a bit more to lean her head against his. "I don't think it's a matter of them not understanding. I think they do, otherwise they would be acting out quite a bit more. As for Kouha… I think he is handling it. It's more along the lines of how you are. He loved those girls that served him, you know. Driving home the idea that he's a disgrace reminds him that they are dead and he couldn't do anything about it. I would be equally upset if something were to happen to Seishun. You could be a little gentler in dealing with that, at least."

“A woman’s gentleness. I should have just sent him to you.” He tightens the arm around her waist, bringing up the other hand to stroke through her hair. “I don’t know how to give him gentleness. I’ll make him a hero in the end, he did beautifully, but sacrifices must be made in war. He told me he understood that, before he left.”
"Gentleness doesn't mean playing the role of a woman," she wryly replies, tilting her head into his touching all the same. "I mean soften your tongue, and don't suggest he find new servants right away." Yes, she might have eavesdropped more than just a bit. "And I'm sure he does understand it, but more than anything, he probably said that to make the conversation end. Why not tell him what you just told me? He did well, and you're proud of him. He just wants you to be proud of him at the end of the day, he looks up to you quite a bit."

It takes a long moment for Kouen to respond. It still sounds soft, his father had never said anything of the sort to him, but maybe that's something from Kouha's mother hanging over him. More than anything it's the feeling of Hakuei in his arms that softens him now, makes him dip his head down to nestle into her neck and murmur, “Very well. I’d call him in right now, but...I’d rather sit with you.”

"Wait until tomorrow. He'll have calmed down a bit more, and it'll be better for both of you." She shifts, wriggling her way back further into his lap as she tips her head to the side, openly welcoming his touch with a little sigh. "You get so caught up in all of this plotting and planning nowadays," Hakuei murmurs, her own hands sliding to brush over Kouen's arm. "I wish you could at least trust in me enough to take some of the weight from your shoulders."

“When one has allies that employ wizards of unknowable power,” Kouen says softly, “one is careful. I don’t know that none of my enemies can read your mind. I don’t know that no one would capture you to force my plans out of you. I’m protecting you as best I know how.”

Well, that's a good explanation of his silence, if nothing else. Hopefully, Koumei will be satisfied with it when she relays it later. “… They would be hardpressed to force my hand or tongue,” Hakuei says, turning her head to butt it against Kouen's neck. "But I understand. If you do need me, though, you know I am here." There's an unspoken my mother really is wretched, isn't she? floating in the air.

“War,” Kouen says, running a hand down her arm, up the smoothness of her neck, “delights me. You know this. I am trying, and I think succeeding, though my enemies are now my allies, my superiors. My objective hasn’t changed, but my methods of fighting have. If my enemies are subtle and close, I must be the same, but more so. Can you stay by my side, knowing that is the case?”

"As long as you can still stand to listen to me telling you that in many instances, you should stay your hand rather than take to the field… I have no intentions of going anywhere," she wryly answers, twisting in his hold to settle her knees to either side of his lap, her arms draping over the back of the chair. "I don't agree with many things you do," Hakuei points out, leaning forward to rest her forehead against his. "I think I would be poor council if I did, though. Do what needs to be done, I will support you."
“You are anything but poor council.” Kouen closes his eyes for a moment, heaving a breath. Everything is easier with Hakuei by his side, running smoother and seeming less unlikely, and some of the things his father had said in passing about the value of a good woman make a sudden sense when she’s around. “Tomorrow, I will fix things with Kouha. Tonight, I want to look at no other face but yours.” He leans forward, claiming her mouth in a kiss, and the lines around his eyes finally relax.

Hakuei would find herself a liar to claim she doesn't enjoy being able to make Kouen relax and think more clearly, even just a little bit.

She considers this mission accomplished, and all the better for it, when it ends in a Kouen that is much more amicable, far softer around the edges and not so tense (no matter how he says he wasn't, he certainly was), and she sighs as she wriggles closer, sliding her fingers back through his hair as she kisses back with a soft nip to his lower lip. "Here?" Hakuei lowly teases, though she doesn't exactly make a case for it any other way, what with how she leans in to make sure her chest presses against him. "You're becoming more scandalous as the years go."

“More impatient.” The press of her breasts against his chest is enough to make him feel far more bold than he would have bothered. Hakuei, only she, makes him want to abandon that which he knows to be prudent only to have her in his lap. Sometimes, he’s cold because of that, resentful of her influence over him, but today all he wants is to be between her legs. “And why not?” he murmurs, a little teasingly, one hand sliding up to cup and squeeze one of her breasts. “The only person who tries to disturb me at this time is your mother.”

Hakuei can't keep back a snort of laughter at that, even as she reaches to loosen the ties of her own robes, shrugging them down her shoulders. "I'm sorry," she manages, a little amused in spite of herself even as she grabs for both of his hands, eagerly guiding them to her breasts and shivering openly at the drag of calloused fingers. "She's really quite awful. Does she still call you her 'beloved son'?"

Kouen grins, cupping and kneading gently, bending to press a kiss and a soft, playful bite to one breast. “Only when she’s attempting to loosen my robes or sit on my lap. I can only be glad you inherited her beauty, and not her malice.”

He growls low in his throat, leaning down to swipe his tongue across one hard nipple. “You taste like a goddess.”

A hiccuping breath follows that, and Hakuei’s fingers immediately wrap themselves into his hair, pulling to only encourage every swipe of his tongue and drag of his teeth as she leans back with a pointed squirm. "Only because you treat me like one," she breathes, eyes fluttering. "I… ah… the day I act a shred like my mother, kill me on the spot."
Kouen laughs at that, urging her back against the desk as he sucks, curling his tongue around a hard nipple, stroking the other with the rough pads of his fingers. “I’d have to,” he murmurs, and bites softly, just enough that he knows it’ll make her shiver. “Or get a wizard to purge the invading consciousness from you. You’re far too strong to be anything like her, Hakuei.”

That’s probably some important map that she sends fluttering to the floor when she leans back, elbows hitting the desk and one hand grabbing onto its edge as she shudders, back arching to better push herself into the wet heat of his mouth, every scrape of his teeth and lave of his tongue sending shivers down her spine. "Let’s… not talk about her anymore," Hakuei gasps, a little laugh fluttering up from her chest as she fumbles with one hand at the clasps of his robes. "It clashes very badly with what you are doing to me."

With any other woman, Kouen would be annoyed at the way she shoves his papers to the floor. He’d be frustrated with her gentle orders, teasing as they are. With Hakuei, he only grins, and hikes her legs up as high as they’ll go. “I want to do more to you. Are you wet for me?” he asks, standing as he nibbles on her neck, down to her other breast, hands firm behind her knees.

Hakuei groans, sliding further over the desk and letting her head loll just a bit over the side, her hair tumbling over it along with at least a dozen other bits and pieces of paperwork. "Yes," she rasps, her breasts heaving as she wriggles to hike up her own robes, twisting to splay open her thighs in open, wanton need. Dripping, aching more like, and she can't find a bit of shame in it, not when Hakuei knows she is the only person to see Kouen like this. "I want you inside of me, En."

Such an old, familiar name, and it makes Kouen’s heart race to hear it from her lips. It calls back a dozen summers spent on the same estate, watching her, knowing her, hasty hidden explorations together probably fine when they’d been expected to marry, everything changed when her family had ripped itself apart. He wants her no less now than the first time, maybe more, and he’s throbbing, hard against her thigh as he presses her down, hissing through his teeth as he guides himself inside with one hand, groaning at the slippery slick tightness, at the smell of her. She’s his, as much as any horse he’s ever owned, as much as his own name, even more because it’s by her own will. It’s the sheer want in her eyes, her body that entrances him, that it’s him that fills the void in her so, as much as she fills all the empty places in him, and her name is a broken thing on his lips when he slides home.

She has the mind, at least, to lift a hand and cover her own mouth, muffling a number of incriminating sounds when he sinks into her, fills her and stretches her and leaves her back arching, her toes curling. Hakuei’s eyes flutter, her head tipping back and her lips parting when she finally lets her hand slide away, a shaky, breathless moan pulling from her throat as she reaches to grab for those broad, strong shoulders instead, wriggling down to desperately press into the deep slide of his cock. "Always feels so good… when you’re inside of me," she breathes raggedly into one ear. "You know just how to take care of me, En."
He leans down for an urgent kiss, arms sliding down to her waist, up to her breasts, unable to leave them for long when they bounce with every thrust, full and heavy and ripe. “Arms around my neck,” he urges, hooking his own under her legs, bending her nearly in half to be able to slide into her that much deeper, to feel her squeeze around every bit of him, a wanton goddess with sweat-slick hair writhing beneath him, the sheer adoration for her reflected in her eyes—maybe not reflected, but answered. “Pull me in, let me see—just like that, I love the way you—” He can’t talk, can barely breathe, and he loves the way she does everything anyway.

Hakuei is all too eager to comply, clinging to his neck as she groans into his mouth, squirming into every thrust, every drag of those big, strong hands that leave her shuddering and arching for more. The way Kouen presses so deeply inside of her is enough to make her breath stutter, enough to leave her chest heaving all the more, her nails biting into the back of his neck when he grinds against her just so and every answering wriggle of her hips makes her body twitch and throb and tremble.

Biting her lip does little to strangle the whimpers and whines from her throat when she comes, the peak of it maddening and dizzying and leaving Hakuei gasping for breath as she clutches and spasms around his cock. "Inside me," she manages to raggedly pant, no matter how her vision still blurs. "I… when you're done, f-finish inside me--"  

It’s all Kouen can do to last this long, and the shuddering clench of Hakuei around him— that breathy plea more than anything else, the idea that maybe, maybe, of spilling his seed deep in her womb, and Kouen is undone. His hips snap up hard, filling her over and over again as he groans, releasing deep inside her, as deep as he can get, his mouth and his nose and his hands full of her, only her, nothing but her.

He wants, more than anything, to stay in that moment of bliss. But maybe what makes it bliss is how fleeting it is, after all.

Hakuei shivers, sinking down into the desk with a slow rush of breath leaving her lungs. One hand lazily lifts to brush over Kouen's cheek, thumb tracing the strong line of his jaw before sliding back through his hair. "You feel so hot inside of me," she breathily purrs, eyes lidded and sated. "One of these days… this is going to get us in trouble."

“I hope so.”

It’s the first time he’s said it aloud, and he reaches a hand down, pressing gently against her belly. Then he swallows, hard. Doubtless she’s guessed, extrapolated, but that’s not the same as saying it aloud. “But I fear it won’t.”
Hakuei's eyes lid, dropping her hand to rest atop of his. "… Paimon is a djinn of fertility," she slowly says. "If I willed it…"

Something—an odd spark of something close to hope—flares in Kouen. “If…” He swallows hard, looking up to meet her eyes. “It’s…your choice.” They’re perhaps the most difficult words he’s uttered to this day.

Hakuei chuckles at that. "It isn't much of one," she simply replies, squeezing her fingers tight about his. "I would proudly bear your child. The problem lies with my heritage at the moment. I’m afraid I wouldn't be the most desirable lineage for even a bastard."

Kouen threads his fingers with hers, and leans forward, inhaling the scent of the woman he wants by his side at all times. “If you were to bear my child,” he says carefully, “I would...have it not be a bastard.”

"… Ah," Hakuei says, lips twitching up into a smile. "Well. What a way to propose to a lady, En."

Kouen pulls back, a little frustrated now, raking a hand back through his hair. “There are barriers,” he mutters, “to me doing things the way I would do them, and if you don’t want me--”

"Stop it, I’m teasing you," she immediately scolds, reaching up to grab his face in her hands and drag him back down into a firm kiss. "Do you think I'm not aware?" she says, meeting his eyes. "As I said, my heritage in and of itself is a problem. My mother is the one causing you all of this unnecessary stress, after all. I want you," Hakuei resolutely adds. "And I would be proud to stand by your side, and bear your child. Are you sure this is the time, though?"

“Your heritage will mean nothing if you are the Empress of Kou,” Kouen says firmly, “and if any call you less than a goddess on earth, I have no use for them.” He claims her mouth again, and admits after a moment, “I think no other woman will bear me a child. Not by their own failings, either.”

"Then allow me to be a little sentimental and call it fate?" Hakuei teases again, stretching up to rub her nose against his. "If you want this," she quietly murmurs, "then we should start trying in earnest. Paimon will lend us her power, I know it."

_I would rather think it fate than my own weakness_, Kouen thinks sardonically, but Hakuei’s way is
better. "In that case," he says with a slow smile, "perhaps I should ensure that you don’t leave my bed for quite a while.” He scoops her up in his arms, the kind of smile he’s rarely worn on his face. “Call your djinn, woman, and make yourself an Empress.”

"Done and done," Hakuei cheerfully sighs, winding her arms back around his neck, a light pull on the djinn in question all it takes. "You get to placate Ryuu when he loses his mind all the more over this, though. You know he’s dreadfully protective over me."

“As long as he isn’t sleeping at the foot of your bed with a knife in hand again. I nearly killed him when he cut me, you know.”

She’d forgotten about that. "I think he's too busy these days to wait around like that," Hakuei wryly allows, trying not to let herself worry too much over that very thought. "Also, a locked door does wonders."

Kouen juggles her around a bit at the door, managing to get her through it without banging either of them on the doorframe, and locks it securely, tossing her down onto the bed. “Now,” he murmurs, casting his robes to the floor, “tell me. Will you be my Empress?”

Kouen does have a fine bed, she'll give him that--though an even finer sight is the fading glow of candlelight cast over every line of muscle he has, and Hakuei shivers as she flops back, wriggling herself free of what remains of her own clinging robes. "There's no question," she sighs, crooking a finger to beckon him to the bed. "I'm already yours."

No matter how many times she’s proven as much with her body, her spirit, her loyalty, hearing the words is somehow more. Kouen covers her body with his own, gathering her up in his arms for a hard kiss, lifting her off the bed with a hand on her back and her buttocks, holding her up against him. “You,” he murmurs against her lips, “will be the mother of my heir. With you…” He breaks off, staring into her eyes. “There will be nothing the two of us can’t do.”

Like this, Kouen is so darnably endearing that it's impossible not to melt. Her hands drag down his back, stroking along his spine, over every hard muscle as she wriggles up against him, her thighs splaying to better wrap about his hips. "And you're so certain I'm worthy of such a thing?" she lowly teases. "All this, from a man of your prowess… you'll spoil me with your flattery."

Kouen laughs, one hand tangling in her hair to force her head back, pressing gentle kisses against her throat, against the pulse of her heart. “Such a willful woman, to tease an Emperor so. I should break you to bridle before I put you to breed.” His hands are gentle in contrast with his playful words, as careful with her soft skin as with a baby’s head or a ripe fruit, cradling and caressing for all his
strength.

Hakuei fairly purrs at that, straining against the hold on her hair to bend her throat at a sharper arc, liking the dull ache of it as her nails scrape lightly over his shoulders. "Good luck with that," she laughs. "Remember that mare that threw you nearly every day when you were a child? That's me. The only difference is I like it quite a bit more when you ride me."

"Then you remember," Kouen says in a low husk, nipping at her neck, "what I did to that mare, and who sat under me when I rode into battle the first time." He flips her over onto her hands and knees, cupping her breasts in large hands, nuzzling into her neck. "Shall I bite you to keep you docile?"

The shudder that rakes up her spine is something close to mind numbing, and Hakuei sighs as she arches her back, settling herself down onto her elbows to better squirm her way back, shivering at the slide of his cock against her. "Do it," she breathes, shifting to push her hair out of the way, "and I promise I'll be a good mare for my Emperor."

Only with Hakuei would Kouen be able to go again so quickly, or anything like it. Only with Hakuei would he care to try. He leans forward, teeth scraping just a tiny bit harder against the side of her neck, slowly rolling his hips up against hers, feeling himself hardening at the slickness there. "You're still wet from my seed," he murmurs. "Call your djinn, and let me breed you properly until you're heavy with child." He cups her breasts, stroking thumbs over her nipples, and murmurs, "And these swell with milk."

It isn't as if she's cared to bring many men other than Kouen to her bed over the years, but certainly, words like that would only make her shiver when coming from him. Every slide of his hands makes Hakuei twitch, the drag of his calloused fingertips over such sensitive skin enough to make her moan, and she swallows hard, barely able to think, let alone focus for the few seconds it takes to pull upon Paimon's power, letting it flood her body and leave her trembling anew as she wriggles back, openly wanting. "As if they need to be any bigger," she groans, her eyes fluttering. "Bite, En, I want your marks on me as much as I want you in me."

"And sully such loveliness? I was joking, Ei," he mumbles, but he lowers his mouth all the same, just to make her nipples harder, to make her wetter, to make her want even more. His teeth close around supple skin as he nudges up behind her, breath stolen at the press of her around him as he slides forward, thrusting in to the root in one smooth motion. He can almost sense it, the play of Paimon's power, the way she swells and ripens under his touch, legs parted and breath quick, and he's never felt more virile than when he's inside her. He bites, and not just for her pleasure as he sinks in, squeezing his hands and pinching her nipples, letting out a groan that might be her name.

The sound that leaves her throat is more a whine than anything else, the squirm and shove of her hips backwards eager and wanton as she twists down into his hands. Kouen's teeth are almost too-rough,
too hard against her skin, and it's obscene how that makes her even wetter, her body shivering and squeezing tight around him. "Not fair… how good you always feel," Hakuei pants out, eyes fluttering closed as she presses her face to the sheets, huffing out a hot breath at the twinge that rakes through her, straight from his pinching fingers and down her spine.

Kouen has a few choice words for how Hakuei always feels in his arms, better than any girl ever thrown or grabbed there, better than any girl who'd ever lied and begged and pleaded to be an Empress, the only one he’s ever truly cared anything for. Even without being able to see her want for him in her eyes, he feels it, feels it in every pulse of her heartbeat, every shove of her hips back against his. Everything about her is good, slick and wet and dripping around his cock, squeezing and sucking him back in with every slow slide out of her. One of his hands rolls a nipple, the other stealing down between her legs, rough fingers finding the place where they're joined and dragging up along her slit, pressing and wiggling until he hears her gasp.

Ah, god.

Those might have been words she uttered aloud, though god help her, she can’t quite recall what with how she pants and moans and mewls, uncaring if she sounds like a harlot when Kouen's fingers feel so good sliding against her. Hakuei's teeth worry into her lower lip, brow knitted as she grinds down into that touch, that and every slick, heated slide of his thick cock inside of her making her muscles bunch and tremble. A dozen requests are on the tip of her tongue--harder, fuck me, please--all bitten back in lieu of just enjoying, and she's certain the squeaks and sighs pulled from her throat are damn good encouragement either way.

“Now,” Kouen pants, teeth catching against one earlobe as he thrusts hard, stroking in small urgent circles with his fingers, “you’ll be a good mare for me, won’t you, Ei? Let me fill you with my seed, make you swollen and--ah--fertile--”

He loses his voice, movements getting quicker, harsher, not out of any desire to mark her up but because he can’t help himself, thrusting in deep every time and knowing what’s going to happen, wanting it to happen, sending up a silent plea to every god he knows and Paimon especially, groaning his lover’s name as he comes hard, filling her, every slick thrust driving his release deeper inside.

She’s lost, moaning into the sheets, biting into them as sweat beads at her brow, leaving her flushed and panting and worthlessly trembling by the time he fills her, slick and hot and there's no stopping the aching, clenching spasm of her own body around him, every tense squeeze around his cock making her feel as if she's coming even harder. Hakuei sags down into the bed with a weak, boneless shudder, every part of her quivering, and that's a nice feeling, being so pleasantly used and sated.
Please is her own, silent plea to Paimon, all she's capable of just then, and Hakuei breathes out a heavy sigh, not bothering to lift her head.

Kouen stays inside her as long as he can, thinking maybe, possibly that will help, before pulling out to curl up behind her on his side, arm around her middle, nestling into the back of her neck. “Should I hold you upside down or something?”

"Try it and I'll bite you next," Hakuei grumbles, snuggling languidly back against him. "If it happens, it happens. If it doesn't this time, we'll try again."

Kouen sighs. “Remind me that trying again is enjoyable,” he murmurs, “and not a chore, lest I get discouraged. It’s...ah, doubtless you’ve heard the rumors.”

"Trying is very enjoyable," she says, nuzzling up underneath his chin. "I won't let it become a chore. And I don't fancy listening to rumors very much, save to prove them wrong."

“Good woman. That’s why you’ll be a perfect Empress.” He pinches her arm gently, other hand rubbing little circles over her belly. “Or at least imperfect enough to make all my boring courtiers turn red in the face, which is perfect to me.”

Hakuei smiles warmly at that, twisting in his arms to turn and press closer still, lips pressing a kiss to one broad shoulder. "How many of your courtiers enjoy a good spar, hmm? Or a race on horseback. I'd challenge them all to both, should I need to prove my worthiness in the public eye and properly win your hand," she teases.

“You speak as if you’re some random tavern wench I’ve picked off the street and decided to make a lady out of,” Kouen says with a laugh. “I should hope all my courtiers are well wary of you already, or they’ve had their eyes closed for a decade. You were the chosen bride of my childhood, you know.”

"My keepers used to think of me as much, until you gave me an army. Then they shut up because they knew they had no say on how much dirt I rolled around in." Hakuei splays a hand over his chest, sliding her fingers along sculpted muscle. "I was afraid you'd outgrow me," she wryly admits. "And with all that happened within my family…"

Kouen grins. “I did outgrow you. Then...I realized you’d been growing too.” He clears his throat, blinking a little and looking away, a bit embarrassed at his own sentimentality. “So it’s all settled,
"… You're cute sometimes," Hakuei says, unable to help herself. "And yes, it's settled. Time to watch my mother lose her mind even more." They can joke about it, of course, but ugh, how she dreads it.

“She needn’t know. We can save it until she’s dead.” Kouen pauses. “That’s not romantic, is it?”

"It is if you're planning on offing her sooner rather than later," Hakuei helpfully suggests.

Kouen thinks for a moment, calculating dates, pushing mental pieces around on a board. “How about if I promise she’ll be dead before the child is born?”

"Good." Hakuei doesn't even have to think that one through. "I don't want her to ever touch it. Or see it." An apprehensive little shudder rakes down her spine. "I don't even want to be around her if I'm with child," she lowly confesses. "She's Al-Sarmen's witch now, through and through. If she is angry or jealous... I can handle her, if it's just me. But..."

At the thought, Kouen’s arms tighten, pulling Hakuei against him. “I’ll send you away.” It’s a good idea, and he likes it more and more with every passing second. “It’s easy, I’ve had a plan for it for months, I just never thought it would be so important.”

Hakuei nods, looping an arm around his neck as she folds herself against him. "… And Hakuryuu?" That settles a lump into the back of her throat. "If he stays here, he'll just keep challenging her. He might try to do the same to you. He isn't... he's not in his right mind, En, you have to know that by now."

Kouen sighs. “What do you want me to do with him? He wants me to kill him, I think, but it sours my stomach. He’s a child, Ei, screaming at me because he hates his mother so much, and I lived when his brothers died. You don’t hate me for that, do you?"

Her brow furrows as she shakes her head. "Why would I? You had nothing to do with it. Ryuu is... he's never been right since that, and I've tried to protect him and help him, but I fear it's only made the situation worse." She sighs, letting her head fall forward against his shoulder. "His djinn isn't helping the situation either. I would say send him away even to Sindria again, but... I think your Magi has made that impossible."
“War with Sindria is inevitable,” Kouen says dismissively. “No matter how many of our family they entrance with their manipulations disguised as kindness, there must be only one king of the world, and Sinbad will never stop. I’ll hardly throw him one of my own family again, no matter how misguided and deluded he can be.” He frowns, thinking. “Maybe some barbarian relatives in the north, I think one of Grandfather’s bastards is the vice-chief of a tribe up there.”

Hakuei opens her mouth to argue, then stops. Now is hardly the time to debate or defend tactics, and thinking back, one look at Kougyoku and how smitten she is proves Kouen's point quite nicely. “… As long as he is away from the Imperial City and our mother, then anywhere is fine,” she reluctantly agrees. "Perhaps a year in the snow will cool his head. I don't want him to die, least of all from some stupid, reckless decision that pits him against you."

“Despite what he thinks of me, I have no intention of causing his death. There’s only one family member I still have to eliminate, and my only ill feelings towards him are strictly based on his personality.” He shrugs. “He used to be fun to tease, I’m not so old that I’ve forgotten.”

"… I think I would prefer him being a crybaby to this right about now," Hakuei wistfully sighs. "At any rate--where on earth are you thinking of sending me? Hopefully with an army, so I have something constructive to do in my spare time. I'll hardly be bedridden for this child or the next."

“Of course with an army, that’s always been the plan. As for where...well, will you mind horribly if I ask you to wait? I can’t send you until we know for certain that you’re with child, and as I said before, the less you know, the safer you’ll be.”

"I don't mind. Plan on it sooner rather than later, though," she says, a kiss brushed to his shoulder. "Paimon is already gloating, I imagine that bodes well."

Kouen is nearly thirty years old, and had stopped trusting to hope a decade earlier. Hakuei, only Hakuei, had given it back. He brushes a finger under her chin, tilting her face up for a slow kiss. “You make me a better man.”

"If you weren't a good one in the first place, I wouldn't be here," she forwardly returns, returning the kiss with a gentle, playful nip.

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Contrary to popular opinion, Kouen doesn’t mind apologizing. It’s being proven wrong he hates, and if he’s already managed to get through that gracefully, why not ease the way for Kouha as well?

Besides, there’s a lightness to his step he’s rarely felt all his life, thinking of the way Hakuei’s face had looked, lit by the sunlight coming through the window of his bedroom, hands folded over her belly in sleep. Too early to know, but…

He raps sharply on Kouha’s door, folding his arms over his chest.

It's a long, fumbling moment before Kouha drags himself out of bed. Why should he be up early when he doesn’t have to be? Sulking doesn't become him, certainly, but he has little desire to go out in the city when he’ll undoubtedly be met by jeers, and the palace halls always hold a chance for En, or worse, Gyokuen…

Minus a servant to pull the door open, it takes a bit longer still, and Kouha unapologetically hauls it open still bed-mussed and bleary-eyed, hardly expecting the sight of his eldest brother standing there. He stares for a moment, rapidly trying to think of every little thing that he possibly could have done wrong. "Ah…" He swallows. "Good morning?"

“It can be.” Kouen takes it back. He doesn’t like being wrong, and he doesn’t like apologizing, but a promise is a promise and he owes Kouha more than this besides. He steps inside the chambers, looking around at the shredded pillows, the ransacked quarters, the things that would have been cleaned up silently in the night if Kouha still had his loyal little flock of servants. “You’ll have new servants today. I’ve arranged for you to meet over a hundred girls, all of whom came to me over the last several years and begged to work under you.”

This again. Immediately, Kouha tenses, no matter how he tries not to. Pick your battles, Mei kept saying. Well, it's too bad this is one he'll always pick. "Why? Because I'm your brother? I don't want them if it's that, I'd rather do without."

“Because you have a reputation, whether you want to or not. It’s hard not to notice the way your servants fawned on you, and every girl in the city looking for a place wants to see what makes you so special.” If he doesn’t do this, Hakuei will be cross, and Kouen will know he’s in the wrong. He sighs, stroking his goatee. “I wanted to tell you yesterday, but I lost my temper. You did very well, on the field. I was very proud of you. And I’m sorry that it was you she targeted, it could have been anyone. I knew she was planning something, but I didn’t know which general she’d go after. I should have, because you were the most successful of anyone under my banner.”

Oh.
Well, that's... a lot better.

Kouha opens his mouth, then shuts it again, biting back the urge to ask for confirmation, to hear it again. Just hearing it once makes the knot in the pit of his stomach unwind, and he rocks on his heels, frowning. "...I didn't mean to lose my temper with you, either," he finally says, hesitantly glancing up. "It just really sounded like you thought I did something wrong, at least in some ways. You know I'd go right back out there, right now, if you wanted me to."

"If you were out there right now," Kouen says seriously, looking into his younger brother's eyes, "you wouldn't be where I need you in a few weeks. A few weeks, that's all I'm asking, and you'll have everything back and more." He reaches out a hand, squeezing Kouha's shoulder. "I wouldn't ask this of you if I didn't think you could handle it."

"I can handle it!" He probably sounds too eager to please, but it's the first bit of relief he's felt since coming home, the first bit of the brother he remembers that he's seen in awhile. "Whatever you need, En," Kouha insists. "I'll do it better than anyone else, whatever it is."

Kouen smiles, and mentally thanks Hakuei. She sees the things he forgets to look at, and just in time, too. "I know you will. Be patient for a few weeks, all right? I promise, no more than a month and you'll be back on the field with your army and your glory and an Emperor's head in your lap. And when you come home, there will be feasts in your honor for a week."

A month. Ugh, that sounds like a long time, but if it means everything that Kouen says it will... Kouha sucks in a slow breath, nodding. "All right. I'll just... stay out of her way until then." Lest I try and kill the bitch on sight.

"I do the same. I'm sending Hakuryuu away as well, that might help make things better." Getting rid of him can hardly make things worse, after all. "Don't feel the need to confine yourself to the palace, but you may if you like. Hmm... when's the last time you went home to the Winter Palace? I'll give it to you for the moment, if you like. It would sell the charade better, and give you some peace and quiet besides."

"Can Mei come?" Kouha doesn't quite think before blurting that out, but there's no helping it even if he had. "I mean... I know you probably need him here, it'd just be lonely without him. He can pretend to be my keeper, besides." Wishful thinking, that.

Kouen's first instinct is to say that of course Koumei can't come, he's needed here, he's a valuable
member of the war council and one of his most important advisors.

But…

“I do owe you, don’t I? Fine, take him. But…” He pulls Kouha close, squeezing his shoulder with a strong grip as he leans in to say very, very quietly in Kouha’s ear, “I never, never, never want that witch to get wind of the two of you, understand?”

Ah. Oh, god. The laugh that escapes is decidedly nervous. Subtlety. Right. Things he's not good at, when it comes down to it. "Get wind of what?" is his innocent, wide-eyed reply.

Kouen holds his eyes, nodding. “Good.” He chucks Kouha under the chin, making his teeth click together. “Watch the biting. When do you want to see the servants?”

Kouha grins a little sheepishly at that. "Ah. Yeah. Umm… give me an hour to actually get dressed. And if there are any magicians in the lot of them, I'd rather meet them first." The subject is still a sore one, but Kouen's not letting him out of it, and with everything else… well, maybe it's a good thing. Kouha sighs, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. "Sorry again, for being such a brat. I know you've got enough to deal with without that."

Kouen waves a hand at that. “You were well within your rights. But promise me one thing? If this works out as I say it will, and you’re rewarded beyond your dreams, a conqueror among men within a month…will you trust me, next time, without demanding an explanation first?”

Kouha doesn’t even have to think before he nods. "Yeah. I mean, I always trusted you, I just… whatever, it's not important." Stings a little, still, that En won't just tell him things, but… "I'll do whatever you need me to."

“I know. You’re a good man, Ha.” Kouen gives his shoulder another squeeze, then turns. “Things are happening, little brother. Pay attention, or you may blink and wind up in a new era.”

"… Sounds like fun to me." Or something that Mei's going to end up sleeping through, one of these days.

“Good. You’ll be at my side when it’s over. And mind yourself with the new servants, they don’t know you yet,” Kouen adds over his shoulder, before leaving and shutting the door behind him.
For all his previous worries and doubts concerning Kouen, Kouha dismisses them easily and quickly enough.

Al-Sarmen's hold on him isn't so strong after all is his thought, and that's the biggest relief Kouha has felt in some time. His brother had been his brother again, and upon seeing the Winter Palace again, a dozen other good memories rush back and smooth away any lingering, stinging worry and animosity.

Of course, this time of year, it's far warmer than he's used to. He doesn't mind, having always taken to the heat well enough, and simply shows more skin than usual, carelessly folding up his robes and pinning them when he starts to sweat too much. Koumei's a bit different, and that's eventually why Kouha suggests they lounge out by the lake that day, where there's a nice breeze and it isn't so terribly stuffy and the air so still.

Besides, it's a vacation after all. That's what he's telling himself, not a temporary isolation in disgrace as Kouen is undoubtedly telling the councils.

The new little group of servants is… decent enough. Kouha's thoughts still sour a bit with them, and it can't be helped. The previous trio of girls that he kept at his side had been his, through and through. He had rescued them from sure death, clothed and fed and nursed them back to health. These girls are merely eager to be at his side and serve him, and without such a reason for complete devotion, he's wary. At least they're pretty enough, capable enough, both as servants and magicians.

Hopefully, eventually, he won't have to keep stuffing his fingers down Koumei's throat to make him shut up when they fuck, worried about prying ears pressed to the door.

"You're still sweating," Kouha mildly points out, never mind the shade of a canopy and slow fanning that he's already bored of. Maybe Kouen should've let Hakuryuu come with him. Then at least he'd have someone to spar with, Mei is patently useless. "I don't get it. How can En and I be so tolerant of the heat and you're just awful with it?"

"En got so brown when he was a child the sun doesn’t even bother,"' Koumei says rather miserably, retreating into his robes like a turtle. "You must just be a mutant. Maybe your mother was a lizard."
He’s not really grumpy. The Winter Palace had always been his favorite place in childhood, not least because that’s where they’d been the first time Father had dumped a pink-haired child on his lap and said carelessly, *Make sure he doesn’t die.*

Back then, of course, the sun hadn’t been quite so hot. The walls are insulated to keep the heat in with a hundred furnaces, and only Kouha’s girls and his own guards with fans keeps him from simply falling out a window to end the suffering. At least it’s a break, and Kouha looks happier than he has in a while, and it’s easy enough to communicate with En by spells and pigeons.

"I dunno. Maybe she was, I don't really remember." Kouha pauses contemplatively. "Hey, I've got an idea."

That’s the last warning he gives before simply hauling Koumei up and to his feet by the arm. "We’ll go swimming!" Of course, the *look* on his face is far from innocent, and it's with a decidedly wicked grin that Kouha makes use of all the strength belied by his slight form, promptly scooping Koumei up and tossing him bodily into the lake.

Really, this is just about as bad as vacation ever is.

Koumei exhales sadly, bubbles floating slowly to the surface. At least he’s not hot anymore, he thinks vaguely as his robes fill with water instantly, dragging him down to the depths of the lake. Kouha will save him, probably. If not, at least he’s not dying in the heat, and he hates swimming.

Kouha only waits long enough to strip off the outer layers of his own robes, waving away Koumei’s panicking attendants. "Don't worry, Mei, I'll save you!" he cheerfully says, no matter that the man *probably* can't hear it, and he dives in, rather like a fish to water as he quickly swims down, snatches Koumei up by the arms, and with a few powerful kicks, makes it back to the surface. Dragging him back to the shore is a *little* bit more effort, more because his robes are *heavy* when they're soaked through, but oh well. "Are you breathing?" Well, if he doesn't answer, that's a no, at any rate. "God *forbid* if I have to give you mouth-to-mouth."

Koumei coughs, but hey, at least he’s not hot anymore, and Kouha looks so cheerful to have fished him out. “No. Not breathing. Save me.”

"Shhh, at least be more quiet when you're dying," Kouha hushedly mutters, yanking him a bit further up onto the shore. He *tries* not to grin when he yanks open Koumei's robes--you know, to make it easier for him to *breathe*--and leans down, pretending to pinch his nose closed as he closes his mouth over Koumei’s. Hey, whatever, he'll take it. Not often he gets to lock lips with his brother in public; every other time is when he's cross dressing and everyone thinks he's very much a girl.
Now this is the kind of lying around Koumei can get used to.

He lays back, closing his eyes and trying not to lean too hard up into Kouha’s mouth, hands twitching nonetheless by his sides. Kouha is an excellent kisser, and he rarely lets himself simply enjoy it without letting it immediately lead to something else. This is sort of a treat, the two of them laying here, not having anything to stop them, anything to interfere, as if they’re actually lovers.

Ah. Dangerous thought. Get rid of that, and just enjoy it.

“My hero,” he murmurs. “You saved me.”

Kouha pulls back with a smirk, trying very, very hard not to start playing with Koumei's hair or really kissing him or--a dozen other things. Public. Yeah, they're still in public. "He's saved!" he happily tosses over, annoyed when his guards and servants start milling about anyway, and Kouha sighs, sitting back onto his knees. "Not so hot now, at least, right? You really should just wear less, it's not like anyone's here and nitpicking us."

Koumei hesitates. Propriety dictates, but...it is really hot out here. “Guards. Servants. Leave us.”

When they’re alone, he strips off, much less self-conscious about the old scars, burns, fading bruises, some of them from before Kouha got home, very few from after they got to the palace. They’re rarely totally naked in daylight, and he slowly twists his hair back into a tail, stretching out under the sun. “You’re right. Better like this.”

"Told you," Kouha sighs, flopping out onto his stomach after kicking off the last, clinging bit of his own robes, sopping wet and particularly see-thru besides, so there’s little point in it all except to be wet and make him sweat more in the long run. "It would've been really boring if En hadn't let you come. My new servants are okay, but…" Not the same.

“I’m surprised you wanted me here,” Koumei admits. “There’s a lot to do here but not much...well. With your new servants there’s not too much privacy. Wish either of us could work a decent silencing spell, then at least you could make me scream louder than I can in the Palace.”

"Our father couldn't breed a single damn magician, are they that hard to come by?" Kouha grumbles, folding his arms and resting his chin atop them as he slowly kicks his feet back and forth. "I probably can ask one of my girls to do it, tell them we're discussing secret politics or something, but... I don't
know, I just don't trust them yet."

“Doesn’t matter. Someday.” Ugh, he can feel his skin burning already, and turns slowly over, letting his back get a fair share. He’s not even sure what his back looks like anymore, not after how desperate he’d gotten while Kouha was away on campaign the last time. “You just need a good war to break them in.”

Kouha spares a glance over in spite of himself, mouth twisting. "You've never been to war, and you've got a million more scars than me," he grouses, reaching over to trail a hand down Koumei's spine after glancing around one last, paranoid time. "One of these days, someone's gonna get carried away."

“They have before.” There’s no use hiding it, after all. The evidence is written all over him, and he’s never been one to trust his secrets to healers. “I’m glad I have more than you. I hate to think about something happening to you on the battlefield. At least I get them voluntarily, for the most part.”

A snort follows that. "No one can touch me on the battlefield." Kouha lets his hand slide away after another, lingering moment, one finger tracing down a particularly wide scar. "I don't even like the idea of whipping you. I can make you scream without something so obvious. It pisses me off, that you have to deal with such idiots."

“It fills a void.” When Kouha says it, when Kouha touches them, it feels so cheap that it’s hardly worth mentioning. Kouha is a gourmet chef, and nothing tastes as sweet as his creations, but he still has to eat when his brother is away, even if it is mixed with gristle at the bottom of a wooden bowl. “Stay by my side and I’ll never look to another.”

"Ahhh, Mei is a romantic," Kouha sighs, flopping his head back down again. "If I could stay with you all the time, I would. Well… okay, that's not true. I'd be bored. If I could take you with me all the time, I would. There, that's more accurate."

“It’s not romantic,” Koumei mutters, even though it is. “You’re just better at it than anyone else, that’s all.” Nonetheless, he flops closer to his brother, burying his face in Kouha’s shoulder. “I’ve been thinking about going with you, next time you go. Don’t look at me like that, I can take care of myself if I try.”

”… When's the last time you lifted a sword?” It's not a teasing insult this time, but a serious question. "I mean, obviously that's not what you'd be coming along to do, but if something happened and you had to…”
“Hmm.” Koumei considers this for a moment. “Probably not for a few years, but I still remember how to use it.” Probably more like a decade, but that’s a few years. “And I still know how to ride a horse, at least. I taught you, remember.”

Kouha sighs a long-suffering sigh. "It's not just remembering how to use it, Mei. You're a twig, I keep telling you. There's a not an ounce of muscle on you. If you don't have the stamina to swing a sword around, knowing the basic idea of it isn't gonna do you any good. It's not gonna keep you on a horse, either, if someone's trying to drag you off." He probably sounds like En. Good.

Koumei sighs. “I just said I was thinking about it. I don’t like the idea of you being alone out there.” Alone and surrounded by an army, but alone nonetheless, without anyone on his level, anyone who understands him.

"Think about it more after you get some meat on your bones again," Kouha grumbles, reaching over to pinch his brother's hip. "So skinny. At least my thighs have a little bit of cushion to them, and I guarantee I could carry you across a desert. Trust me, I'd love it if you came with me, but I want you not dead more than that."

“Stop that, it’s my job to take care of you.” Always has been, almost since he can remember. “Maybe while we’re here I can work on re-learning the sword.” God, even the idea of it makes him tired, and he flops his head down onto Kouha’s chest.

"… How about you just stay at home and be an advisor where you don't have to move more than five inches per day?" Kouha grins, dragging his fingers slowly through his brother's damp hair. "If you're gonna expend any energy, do it taking me out into the city or something."

“How am I supposed to do that? You didn't bring any of Gyoku’s clothes with you, did you?” Koumei teases, eyes lidding heavily at the drag of Kouha’s fingers through his hair. “You….mmm. I could advise you on campaign. From your tent.”

"I might have brought a few things." He's getting good at this planning thing. "And if my tent gets torn apart from a surprise attack from the enemy?” he grouses, pulling on Mei's ponytail. "Seriously, just stay at home, En needs you, too."

Koumei sighs. “If that’s where you want me. I get…a little weird, without you around. Sometimes. Only after a while. It’s a lot harder to plan for expected losses when you’re one of the little pieces En is moving around his board.”
Okay, that's fair. Same concept as his own worries about Koumei coming with him, really, but the difference is--"I'm pretty strong, Mei. I'm not gonna be an 'expected loss.'"

“No matter how strong you are,” Koumei mutters, tucking his face into Kouha’s shoulder, “you’re still so little. And you’re not an acceptable loss. I just wish En followed my advice more, I try to keep you safe, but...he has plans.”

"Can't figure out if you're jabbing at my age or my height," Kouha grumbles, flopping his head back with a long sigh. "En sends me out as a General, not as a brother. And I'm really good at it, he said so. He's not gonna send me anywhere with my death in mind." Another, light pull on Koumei's hair follows. "Now who's the one not trusting him, huh?"

“Sorry. You’re right.” Koumei stretches out, then curls up, not liking how much taller he is than Kouha right now. “You are good at it, the reports we got back were amazing. En was so proud of you.” He reaches out, brushing a strand of hair behind Kouha’s ear. “So was I.”

There's no helping how he swells with pride at hearing that, and Kouha shifts, squirming to twist onto his side and wriggle up against Koumei's chest. "You know he actually said that to me, too? I could hardly believe it," he sighs happily.

“I'm not. He talked about it all the time when you were away.” Koumei traces a hand down Kouha’s back, feeling the little bumps in his spine, that delicate curve. “He’d get so excited in private meetings, when that witch wasn’t around. Got me really worked up, thinking of you out there.”

That would be the one benefit of having Koumei along. His brother would actually get to see him at work. "Even if it's a bad idea... it would be nice, having you there," Kouha admits with a purring sigh, arching his back as he paws at Koumei's chest, grabbing at a loose strand of his hair to tug. "Even if it's just to give me a shoulder massage at the end of the day or something. That sword gets heavy."

“You have so many girls who would kill for a chance to rub you down,” Koumei murmurs, working his hands up and down Kouha’s shoulders from behind, thumbs rubbing gently. “What makes you want it from me specifically?”

"Because it's you," Kouha sighs, butting his head into his brother's neck all too like an affectionate cat. "Also, you're better at it than most girls. And you've got girly hands, you know," he teases.
“You’re one to talk about being girly,” Koumei mutters, tugging on a lock of pink hair. “What did you bring, by the way? Stockings?” Please tell me you brought stockings.

"Shut up, you like it." Kouha snaps his teeth at Koumei’s hand. "And yeah, I brought everything. Hope Gyoku won’t miss it too much," he adds with a laugh. "Does that mean you want me to dress up all pretty for you? Mei really is a pervert."

“I like it when you look all pretty.” Kouha’s the only one, too. Usually he prefers it when the person taking him is large, strong, faceless, anonymous, masculine, but he does love it when Kouha dresses up. Part of it is being able to go into the city, holding Kouha in his arms, feeling like they’re lovers for once outside of a dark bedroom, watching Kouha’s face light up as he stands over him in heels. “Makes it more complete, when I surrender to you.”

"… Do you ever let girls do things to you?” He can’t help but be curious, when Koumei is saying things like that. "Outside of just bedding them out of obligation or whatever, obviously. Though, I guess most girls don't like to throw their weight around like that, especially with a prince, huh?"

“Mm, exactly. One time,” Koumei remembers, wriggling onto his back, “maybe, oh, five years ago? You were away, and I went down to the city.” Unspoken is the fact that he only goes to the city alone to find a room full of anonymous men to throw him against a wall and fuck him stupid. “My favorite place had closed down and I went to a new one, and there was a woman all in leather with a riding crop. She was...interesting, and she had a piece of hard rubber she shoved inside me. I looked for her next time, but she was gone.” He shrugs. “Apart from that, mostly men. Nothing against women, they just don't like to throw their weight around like that, especially with a prince, huh?”

"Ahh, opposite problem here," Kouha volunteers with a sigh, flopping over on top of Koumei and squirming his way against him. "No shortage of girls that like being held down and fucked, even if some don't like being slapped around so much. I can call them sluts and they eat it up, anyway. But most men are just… ugggh. They look at me like I'm fresh meat, makes me wanna cut their dicks off. Sometimes they really do think I'm a girl, even when I'm not trying to look like one. Groooosss."

“The ones you have to look out for,” Koumei says slowly, “are the small men. The short ones, who have small dicks and like to hurt you to make up for it. They always do everything wrong.” He nuzzles against Kouha’s neck. “Your soldiers didn’t try anything with you, did they? I mean, I know you’d have just killed them, but that would be quite an insult to our family.”

"Oh, hell no. They respect me." Respected. They're dead now. Kouha's jaw twitches and he shoves his face down into Koumei's neck. "Just stupid pieces of shit whenever we're going through cities or towns. I'm not into most guys, not pretty enough and they don't like being bossed around, so I don't
let them near me enough to figure out if they've got a small dick or not.”

“Boring.” Koumei heaves a sigh, raking his nails lightly up Kouha’s back. “I was on campaign with En once when we were...oh, teenagers. Father took us out West to the border, and En took me out drinking that night.” He stretches out, remembering. “That was the first night I thought there’d be something...mm, alluring, about being unwilling. En killed the men before they could try anything, but it gave me the idea nonetheless.”

Kouha has to remember they’re still relatively in public, that his servants could technically walk up at any time, especially when Koumei’s scratching at his back like that and make him shiver. He sets his teeth to his brother’s shoulder all the same, a slow, even bite to vent a few of his frustrations. “Remember that one winter we came here, when En was on a campaign?” Kind of impossible not to, all things considered. "I got drunk and was all over you that first time and you kept trying to act like you didn't like me telling you what to do. You're an awful liar in bed."

Koumei lets out a hiss through his teeth, wriggling under Kouha’s body, enjoying just that little rough touch far too much. “I wasn’t trying to lie,” he mutters. “I didn’t care about you knowing that, really. I was just trying not to let you see that I was hard for you. You were only twelve, fuck.” It seems like a lifetime ago that he’d realized how much he wanted Kouha, hard on the heels of realizing how much Kouha wanted him and how wrong it was.

Never, never, never let that witch get wind of you two.

That's a pretty solid warning coming from Kouen, but... Koumei is all wriggly and warmed from the sun and another, quick glance around proves that there's no one exactly there, so--"Twelve and already had girls wanting my cock," he smugly retorts, sliding his mouth up the side of Koumei's neck to grab and tug at his earring with his teeth. "And my older brother wanting me to smack him around like the cheapest whore of them all."

Koumei thinks about saying that he certainly hadn’t craved that kind of thing before Kouha had climbed into his lap and started biting him, but it’s not far from true anyway, and it does make Kouha swell to think about being wanted. “The cheapest whore is a free one,” he murmurs, baring his neck as his head lolls back, arching up against Kouha. “And I’ve never asked you for a penny.”

"That's because you're perfect." Ah, damn, hadn't Kouen said something about being careful with biting, too? How the hell is he supposed to do that when Koumei's begging for it with that pretty, pale throat all in an arc? Kouha huffs out a breath, fisting a hand back through his brother's hair to yank, pulling his head back harder as his mouth drags over the harsh, straining arc of his throat, sucking on the bob of his Adam's apple, then biting down to suck even harder. "You're gonna get us in trouble, Mei." Yeah. He's blaming this one on him.
“Am I?” Koumei pants, leaning up into his brother’s mouth, everything already getting delightfully swimmy and dizzy and fuzzy around the edges, only the good parts coming in in bright focus, the way it does with Kouha, only Kouha. “Punish me, then.”

Well, if he's asking for it...

Kouha lifts his head for a final, wary sweep of the area before he backhands Koumei almost casually. There's really something about watching his own handprint blossom red over such pale skin, and Kouha exhales a shaky breath, eyes too-bright. "Sloppy whore. I bet you'd like it if they all came back and saw, wouldn't you?" He reaches back, sliding a hand down to grab Koumei's cock. "Some prince you are, so hard for your little brother. They'd probably all want a turn, too."

The idea of being stripped bare in front of everyone, punished by Kouha’s mocking words and cruel hands while the guards and servants and ah, total strangers watched him, makes him as hard as the backhand across his face. Koumei lets out a ragged groan, thrusting up into Kouha’s hand, arching his back as he ruts mindlessly against the pressure. “Would you let them?” he breathes. “Without caring what I said about it, hold me down and let everyone have a turn with me?”

"Let them?" Kouha laughs at that, grinning as his fingers squeeze tight around the base of Koumei's cock, too tight to feel good. "I'd tell them to do it. What good is a slut if he isn't stuffed full of cock?" he taunts, twisting his other hand's fingers around a nipple, pinching with every arc of Koumei's back. "That's about all you're good for."

Koumei’s breath catches, and he shudders at the squeeze to his cock, tight enough that it should only be painful, feeling himself getting less hard even as he ruts up into the touch, gasping at it and wanting more. “No good,” he agrees, “only for taking cock.” Just because they’ve never invited anyone to their bed doesn’t mean he hasn’t thought about it, stroked himself off while imagining Kouha standing in front of him, twisting a nipple and slapping his face and laughing at him while some man (some men) stuff him full of cock, using him only as a hole to get off. “Only for getting you off.”

Kouha's really going to make a rule next time. No one else touching Koumei while he's gone, no one, and then maybe he'll come back to this times a million, a riled up and squirming Mei that's so desperate he'll do anything. The thought makes his mouth go dry, his cock so hard that he can't breathe, and his hand slides away from Koumei's cock with a last, cruel squeeze before he scoots forward, grabbing at his brother's hair as the head of his cock nudges at his lips. "Yeah, and you're damned good at it," he mutters, fingers pressing into his jaw to force his mouth open, shoving past Koumei's lips to slide hard and dripping over his tongue. "Made for it. You're so hot inside."
Koumei opens his mouth eagerly, gratefully, letting Kouha slide past his lips and over his tongue in a second, straining up until Kouha’s thrusting down his throat. He moans, sucking in air through his nose as he lurches up, both his hands coming up to Kouha’s thighs, sliding around to his ass to squeeze, pulling him in harder, not stopping until his lips brush short hairs and he swallows hard around the cock down his throat. Then, he lets himself gag, the kohl just barely brushed at the corners of his eyes running down his face with the tears, throat spasming as he chokes, even though he doesn’t pull back.

Kouha groans, fingers nearly white-knuckled as they yank at Koumei’s hair, his hips eagerly shoving forward and down as he lends himself to the squeeze and pull of his brother's hands. No helping it, not when Koumei’s mouth is so hot and his throat so fun to fuck while he’s choking and gagging and making all those deliciously slutty noises, sloppy and wet around every inch of him when he shoves in deep and holds Koumei’s head down until his eyes roll back.

"This time," Kouha pants out, punctuating his words with another, hard thrust, liking the way Koumei’s eyes tear up all the more, "you’re gonna swallow all of it. Know you love the taste, if you miss a drop I'll make you--ahh, lick up your own mess, too--"

He pulls back when he comes, just enough to spill over Koumei’s tongue rather than entirely down his throat, wanting to watch, no matter how hazily, that throat bob and work to swallow all of him, his fingers clenched tight in all of that red hair to hold him in place.

Koumei has to squeeze his thighs together to keep from coming just at that. He wriggles his tongue, eyes lidding as he heaves for air, swallowing hard and trying not to swallow too fast, wanting to let it sit in his mouth, the taste and the feel of it reminding him how low he is, just a pervert who wants to drink his little brother’s seed. He swallows, finally, cleaning off the tip of Kouha’s cock with his tongue, and pulling shakily back, opening his mouth to show how he’d obeyed as his hand steals down between his legs, squeezing his cock hard to keep himself from coming until he’s allowed. Sometimes it’s fun to be disobedient and get punished, but he feels like being good today.

"Good boy," is Kouha's breathy exhale, his thumb sliding over Koumei's lips as he pulls back, little shivers still raking up his spine. It's hard not to hand out praise when Koumei looks like that—sloppy and mussed, all flushed and tear-stained. "And you didn't even come. Really good." A slow, twisting pinch to one nipple is his reward for that, and Kouha slides his other hand back, thumb dragging up the length of Koumei’s cock. "Maybe I shouldn’t let you come at all, though. Maybe I should make you wait ‘till tonight, when I get all dressed up for you. You'd probably like fucking between my thighs like a real pervert when I'm all dressed up like a girl."

Koumei whines, protesting the cruelty of being made to wait, kept on the edge like this for hours, even as part of him revels in the degradation. “Always like it when you let me serve you,” he murmurs, licking sticky lips and shivering all over again at the lingering taste. “What...ahh…” He bites his lip, thrusting up into Kouha’s hand, the mental image glittering strong and perfect in his
mind, making him nice and hard. “What would you...ahh--shove inside me?”

"Hmm? My ass wouldn't be enough to get you off?" A snort, and Kouha's hand lazily connects with the side of Koumei's face again, still hard enough to redden already flushed skin. "Maybe I should let one of your guards take you at the same time, then. They'd think you were just rutting on a little girl, a spoiled prince that likes them young and soft and pretty, but really you're just begging to be fucked yourself."

Koumei shudders hard. It's possible, just possible that Kouha is being serious, and the idea of that makes him rut up into the lightest touch, imagining it so clearly. “Then I...really would just be a toy for you to use,” he moans, face burning around the slap, licking his lips again trying to get just another hint of the taste if his brother's cock. He can feel himself starting to sink into that state, and pauses, breathing hard. “Should I--are we safe here?” he pants, looking up at Kouha. “Or should we move? Want me to check?” If he even can focus his magic now, which is doubtful.

We aren't safe here or anywhere, not nowadays. The reminder of that makes Kouha's mouth twist, and he growls lowly in frustration. "Like you'd even be able to get up when you're like this," he points out lowly, dragging his hand up the length of Kouha's cock, thumb rubbing over the leaking tip of it. "We can have more fun later, when we're out in town and no one knows it's me. You've been a good boy, so I'll wear those stockings you like so much when I'm shoving my cock in you so deep that you won't be able to think."

Koumei nods desperately, the idea of his brother in those stockings prancing around and giving him teasing little touches almost as arousing as the hand on his cock. He ruts up shamelessly, panting, and mutters, “Thank you, thank you, please let me come so I can get up--”

Kouha has the mind to drag a hand down Koumei's throat, scraping his nails over the bruised flesh before squeezing, just enough of a possessive, lingering pressure to make his breath that much harder to catch as the hand around his cock squeezes and strokes harder. "Go on, then. Come all over yourself like the dirty little slut you are, you just can't help but be a mess."

That’s too much.

The hand around his throat is perfect, the one thing he never lets anyone but Kouha do to him, and Koumei arches up with a choked-off cry, spilling hard over Kouha’s hand and his own stomach, arcing up to splatter on Kouha’s back as he twists and squirms, relishing every bit of the slowing of his pulse, the heady pain shooting through him, the involuntary twitching of every part of him as he slowly comes to rest.
Kouha hums, sliding slick, dripping fingers down his own lower back to wipe up the mess there before he shoves a pair of fingers into Koumei's mouth, twisting them lazily against his tongue. "Really messy. Should I throw you back into the lake again before we head back?"

Koumei laughs weakly, sucking on Kouha’s fingers with absolute glee before letting them go with a last, soft suck. “As long as you’re prepared to fish me out again.”

Maybe Koumei really is rubbing off on him, because that sounds like way too much work. His nose wrinkles, and he drags his hand away before flopping to the side. "Whatever, just stay a mess, then." Kouha pauses, sort of morbidly amused by one particular thought. "You do get off really fast thinking about me in women's clothes. If I was your sister, would you still fuck me?"

Koumei snorts at that. “I don’t know.” He frowns, thinking about it for a moment, trying to think of Kouha as whatever he would be in a dress, and ends up discarding the idea. “Of course I would. I’d always want you no matter what you looked like. We’d just have to be more careful.”

"Good answer." Kouha wriggles close again, pressing an affectionate kiss to Koumei's cheek. "Mei is always so good to me. I'll treat you extra special tonight, just for that."

Honestly, the idea of Kouha being better to him is hard to imagine.

Still, the idea of it is enough to give Koumei the energy to make himself closer to Kouha’s idea of presentable, properly decked out in his city clothes with his hair swept back no matter how annoying the pins and ties in his hair are, and he even lets his servants put on a pair of boots that aren’t for riding before he slinks down the hallway, rapping on Kouha’s door. “Your escort, Princess.”

He's gotten pretty good at this over the years, which definitely would be considered an odd thing for a prince to be good at. Oh well. What matters is that he can dress himself in enough draping finery meant for women to look terribly convincing without a shred of help from any servants, which is good, because Kouha definitely doesn't trust the ones he has yet for something like this (and especially not when it comes to his hair or paint, women don't really understand what it means to go overboard at times, anyway).

"They're not even going to recognize you," Kouha lowly teases when he opens up the door, stepping out in a flurry of ruffles and silks. "You should try this thing called 'looking nice' more often, you might catch yourself a fine woman."
Koumei’s eyes go dark and wide at the sight, openly enjoying the way Kouha flounces in that little
dress, face painted and hair coiffed, those stockings riding up much higher than he can see under the
skirts. He offers an arm, murmuring, “I can’t think of anything I want less than a woman who isn’t
you on my arm.”

Ooh, charming. That’s cute. Kouha beams as he latches onto Koumei’s arm, less clingy and more
delicate, just like a good little princess should be. He’s perfected this act over the years—had to, if it
meant any sort of pawing at Koumei in public. “So look nice for your princess more often, then,
hmm? Then maybe you’ll get me on your arm lots more, I like a handsome man.”

“I don’t get how this is so easy for you,” Koumei mutters, but it’s nice to have Kouha on his arm
nonetheless. It’s a lot nicer than any of the times he’s had to escort some foreign princess or
demanding noblewoman to an event, hurrying home after to bathe to get the cloying perfume off of
him, worse on the nights he’d felt courtesy dictated he take the woman to bed.

He plays the gallant escort, helping Kouha into the carriage to town, and out again once they hear the
buzz of humanity close by. “And tonight,” he murmurs, “does my princess want to dance? Or eat?”

Koumei is fun. Fun to tease, fun to poke at, fun to play with in all senses of the word, and this sort of
thing is no different. It's easy because it's with you Kouha would point out if it weren't so obvious,
and he tries not to bounce too much at the sound of humanity again. There's only so much isolation
he can take, after all. "Food first," he happily says, latching himself back onto Koumei's arm. Like
this, it really is too easy to fall into the role of lovers—even if Koumei's reputation is sort of hilariously
opposite that, and labels him notorious for not keeping the same woman around twice.

Koumei had spent three months a year in this town, for the first two decades of his life. He knows
the restaurants and taverns better than he knows some rooms of the Imperial Palace, and steers
Kouha easily to one of the best ones, a raise of his eyebrow enough to make the barmaid abandon
her other customers and hurry over. They recognize him, if not Kouha, something that makes him
smirk inside. “My lady? What will please you tonight?”

Kouha does have to remind himself that princesses don't eat like soldiers (or even over-eager princes
that are still getting used to real food and not rations). The food and wine are good, and Kouha takes
his time so the latter doesn't go to his head, lest he end up doing something stupid in public.

A year ago, and his servants probably would have been here, tagging along at a respectable distance,
just to make sure no one ruined their evening. His thoughts sour a bit at that, and he drains his
second wine glass a little too fast. "We're going to have a hell of a time getting back in," Kouha sighs
in spite of himself, toeing off one shoe beneath the table to slide it across and poke at Koumei's knee.
"Those new girls of mine are nosy. They start flipping out if I don't tell them what to do for an hour
or so."
“I don’t know how En managed to find you girls who are so eager to serve you.” Koumei sips his wine slowly. He rarely indulges, not when it sours his stomach long before it makes him feel anything other than sick, and there are much better ways to get the buzz he loves. Smoke does the same, makes him cough and retch no matter how many times he’s tried, and it’s easier just to leave it alone. “He always has a devil of a time replacing one of mine whenever they go off.”

"That's because you're high maintenance," Kouha mildly points out. "Mostly, I just want mine on a whim or two, or to keep my rooms neat. You can barely get out of bed in the morning without someone dragging you. So lazy. I had to turn over a hundred girls away."

Koumei shrugs. “At least I’m wealthy enough to keep them no matter how much work I want them to do. Really, if they didn’t want to work, they shouldn’t have become servants. Ah, the venison is still nice here.” He reaches over, giving Kouha’s thigh a pinch under the table, just because he can. His toes promptly knead into Koumei's calf. "Prince Koumei of the wandering hands. Y'know," Kouha idly notes, "I remember this town being a lot more populated. I guess the effects of the wars have really spread this far south." An annoyed sigh, and he starts in on his third glass of wine. "En's gonna have a hell of a time getting close to Magnoshutt or Laem again."

“He has a plan. He always has a plan,” Koumei points out. “I bet after the war he'll bring back Great-Grandfather's practice of giving a woman a gold coin for every brat she pops out, that'll get the population back up.” He lowers his voice and mutters, “Not like he can do it on his own like in Sindria.”

Kouha chokes, trying his best not to laugh and failing. "Rude, Mei," he giggles. "I dunno, maybe he's gotten busy lately, he seemed reeeeally happy when he was talking to me and sending us off. Hey, you think that's why he hates Sindria's king so much?"

Koumei laughs into his food as hard as he ever does, a little smirk and a gentle huff of breath. “As if he needs more reasons to hate that man. And...” He leans in close, tucking a strand of hair behind Kouha’s ear. “Of course he has,” he murmurs, close enough for Kouha to feel the heat of his breath, and ah, this is better in public. “We’re not the only members of this family who enjoy each others’ company, you know.”

At that, Kouha scrunches up his nose, even as his eyes lid and he leans into the touch of Koumei's hand with a sigh. "Mnn, but they're cousins," he points out, dropping his chin into one hand before reminding himself that's not particularly ladylike and straightening up again. "He's gonna marry her, probably. He looooves her, he's such a puppy dog when she comes around."
“Keep your legs crossed,” Koumei says idly, pinching a thigh again. “Everyone’s going to say you’re a harlot.” He thinks for a moment, then nods slowly. “I really don’t see what the difference is between brothers and cousins. We’ve all got the same grandparents, haven’t we? I mean, for commoners, sure, but royalty?”

Grumbling, Kouha neatly folds his legs back up, even if he lets one edge of his skirts errantly hike up a bit, just to encourage Koumei’s hands on his thighs. "Probably more the two brothers fact than anything else," he mutters with a roll of his eyes. "Not exactly the kindest to two men that like to roll around, our country."

“You think it would be any different if it were Gyoku you were slapping around?” Koumei asks lazily, fingers stealing beneath the edge of that skirt, squeezing the firm flesh. “Or Keikei, or Elia, or any of them that I was rolling around with? Like to see that royal wedding.”

"Gyoku's got a crush on En even if she won't admit it, so don't even get started with that.” Kouha sighs distractedly, squirming a bit. It's difficult sitting like a lady when Koumei's hands feel so good. "The blood's still too close if it's brother-sister marriages, that's what our laws say. Like I said, it's just people being stupid about two men fucking." He takes another sip of his wine before leaning over with a smirk. "Remember how weird En used to be about it? That sure as hell changed when Judal started rolling his way into his bed."

"Mm, but I bet he thinks that’s different because Judal’s a Magi,” Kouen points out, letting one arm steal around Kouha’s waist. It feels a bit wrong to be like this in public, more so than when they’re alone, to be treating Kouha, a prince, his beloved brother, like any woman that had stolen onto his arm. Doesn’t mean he doesn’t like it, though. “En’s good at finding excuses. Oh, that doesn’t count, he’s the next thing to divine. Oh, we don’t count, we’re only cousins.” He snorts. “Shouldn’t matter with him anyway, he won’t be able to plant her any more than he has any woman.”

"Mmm, he sure as hell likes the excuse of calling out her name when he's drunk and not paying attention to who's sucking his cock,” Kouha wickedly replies, snuggling his way against Koumei's side and leaning his head against his brother's shoulder. "At least he leaves us alone and doesn't seem to mind what we do nowadays," he lightly points out. "You know, so long as we don't draw attention to it. No one bats an eye at me anymore, anyway, because I flirt with everyone."

“I should slap you,” Koumei mutters. “He always acts cross the day after you wiggle your way onto your knees in front of him, and he starts muttering about marrying you off.” He sighs, pressing a kiss to Kouha’s head, and ah, this really is worth it after all. He picks up a piece of fruit, dipping it in stiff cream before popping it into his brother’s mouth. “Even after you’re married, you’ll find time for me, won’t you?”
Kouha bites his cheek in a pout before chewing and swallowing. "Too young to talk about marriage," he complains dismissively. "He's not gonna marry me off, he doesn't have a better general to lead his armies while he stays at home and plays with Ei. I'm gonna laugh if he really does get her pregnant."

“He might marry you off,” Koumei argues. "I can think of three suitable candidates, all from border countries he’d be thrilled to assimilate. He already promised he won’t inflict me on a woman because I’m unpleasant and boring, but there are going to be wars for you.”

"Gross,” Kouha grumbles, turning his head to butt his face into Koumei's shoulder. "Why couldn't I be born unpleasant and boring, too? And hideous, for that matter. Find a prince from those same countries, marry any of our seven other sisters for god's sake."

“He probably wants you to rule one of those countries,” Koumei murmurs, stroking a hand through his brother’s hair. “They’re all good for looking pretty but they’ve got feathers for brains. Except Gyoku, she’s got jelly in there or something.”

"I don't want to rule anything, I just want to go to war." Kouha sighs, long and hard. "Gyoku's not dumb, she's just a girl. Thinks too much about men and what they think of her. Judal's a dozen times worse and a bad influence on her, but whatever, if they wanna exchange fantasies about the King of Sindria together, that's their prerogative."

Koumei makes a face. “Don’t see how great this guy can be. No matter how many djinn he’s got he can only use one at a time. And I saw him when he came to visit, he isn’t that handsome. Rather have you any day.”

"Must have a really nice dick or something," Kouha muses, snuggling his way closer and rubbing his cheek against Koumei's shoulder. "I've never met him, but Judal's gone on and on about him so I get the gist of it. I don't think Gyoku's really thinking straight concerning him; still got her mind on the war with Sindria. I like her, but En might wanna just… either marry her off, or give her something to do. She is a dungeon capturer, it's a waste of resources letting her rot in her rooms."

“Since when have you gone for a man based on his dick?” Koumei teases, tiptoeing his fingers up Kouha’s thigh. “Should I worry that you’re going to start bullying stupid Sinbad instead of coming to my bed at nights?” He hardly wants to talk about Gyoku at the best of times, certainly not when he’s got someone much better, more interesting, and prettier on his arm.

"I wasn't saying I liked him because of that or anything! Just that a lot of people must," Kouha protests on a whine, squirming slightly, which just so happens to hike his skirts up more. "So jealous,
Mei. I don't like other men, I don't take other ones to my bed, you know." En doesn't count.

Koumei nuzzles into Kouha’s hair, sliding his hand up far enough to feel the warmth nestled between his thighs. “I don’t care who you take to your bed as long as you don’t kick me out of it.”

"Jealous and paranoid?” A little sigh, and Kouha tries not to spread his legs like a harlot. Easier said than done. "You're perfect, why would I ever wanna kick you out?"

Koumei takes advantage of the fact that Kouha looks like a woman, and leans down to give him a long, sweet kiss. “Because I’m unpleasant and boring?”

Kouha smirks at that, and lurches up a bit to kiss back, his teeth lightly catching on his brother's lower lip. "Just means no one else is gonna try and steal you anytime soon. Makes it easier on me that they don't know what they're missing."

“As if I'd ever bother with anyone else.” Ah, this is the problem with going out on the town, Koumei just wants to drop to his knees and wriggle his head under that skirt, sucking Kouha into his mouth the way he had earlier, but he’s always unable to keep silent. “I don’t think I even know anyone else’s name that I’ve ever fucked.”

All right, that's actually hilarious. "... Wow, no wonder girls don't like you. You're awful, Mei."

“So I've been told.” Koumei stretches his arms out, only encircling Kouha tighter after that. “Why should I remember boring things when I can remember every book I've ever read instead?”

"Because unlike books, girls are warm and soft and suck cock," Kouha lowly teases, sliding a hand down his brother's chest. "You've got a nice one, though, so I guess you're allowed to be particular about who touches it."

“Thanks for the permission.” Koumei slides down a hand and plucks at the top of Kouha’s stockings. “You done eating? I forgot how much of a tease you are when you're dressed like that.”

"I'm a tease? You're the one that keeps touching me," is Kouha's defense, complete with wide eyes and an innocent blink to follow. "But yeah," he adds, finishing off his glass of wine. "I'm done. What's it gonna be, an alleyway or me finding my way into your lap in our carriage, hmm?"
Koumei swallows hard. “I don’t know,” he murmurs, already twitching at the idea of it. “Which is going to be easier for me to get between your pretty thighs, miss?”

Kouha fights back a smirk at that, and an errant hand slides between Koumei’s legs, just for a brief, fleeting touch. "All this talk has really made me want this," he breathes. "And a proper lady would probably like some privacy."

Koumei’s eyes lid, and he reaches into his robes for a few coins--far more than the paltry meal is worth, but that’s the way a prince is expected to pay. He takes a moment to breathe before standing, nearly lifting Kouha off his feet in his haste. “Then, my lady, after you.”

They can wander around the rest of the town after they take the edge off. That's Kouha's excuse, at any rate, for hurrying back to the carriage as gracefully as possible, and it's a fortunate thing that its attendants think little of a girl with wine-flushed cheeks pawing eagerly at a prince.

Koumei is still easy to toss around and shove down, even when Kouha is dressed like this, and he makes short work of that much by all but throwing his brother into his seat and crawling up into his lap afterward. "You've really got a thing for these, don't you?" he taunts, hiking his skirts up properly for a better glimpse of the skin of his thighs not quite covered. "Trying to make a whore out of your princess, too?"

It’s sort of impossible, most of the time, to tell how Kouha wants to be treated. Sometimes like a man, sometimes a princess, sometimes a demanding harlot, sometimes a king, and Koumei’s never cared to learn En’s talent with reading people.

That’s why he loves so much that Kouha is so content to take the lead.

He runs his hands up the lean, smooth thighs in front of him, plucking at the tops of his stockings, watching the way they sink just slightly into the skin. “Yeah, I like them,” he breathes. “I want to soil them.”

"Pervert,” is the heated sigh to follow, though he's hardly one to talk with how his legs spread over Koumei's lap so eagerly. "Get your cock out already," Kouha orders, and he wraps a hand up into the collar of Koumei's robes, rather liking how he can yank and pull and choke him a bit as he wriggles down, his own cock hard and pressing against his brother's stomach. "And you better've brought something we can use, I wanna feel you all hard and slick and messy when you're in me."
Koumei wordlessly pulls out a small vial of scented oil, the fruity, fragrant stuff Kouha likes best for their coupling. He pulls himself out, biting his lip at the warm press of Kouha on top of him, even through his clothes, and in seconds he’s gliding slick and eager up between stocking-clad thighs. “Just a little here,” he groans, watching the head of his cock press up between Kouha’s legs. “Just a little, I just...ahhh, I like seeing it…”

Kouha's own gaze flickers down, hiking up his skirts higher to better watch as he squirms and shifts to press his thighs around Koumei's cock. "Should just start wearing these all the time," he breathlessly teases. "Under my formal robes and everything. I'd like to see you sit through a council meeting with that in mind, Mei."

“I’d end up having you in there,” Koumei breathes, unable to look away from the obscene, pulsing throb of his cock between Kouha’s legs, the rough brush of the stockings contrasting with the sweet slickness of his thighs. “When everyone left, just pull you into my lap and do this--ahh, I love being between your thighs, it’s better than being inside anyone in the world.”

That's a nice mental image, nice enough that he hurriedly grabs at the oil to slick up his own fingers, all while deliberately squeezing his legs tighter together, breath hitching at the hard ache of Koumei's cock. "Who are you kidding? You wouldn't be able to wait until they all left." His body twitches and shivers at the slide of one, slick finger deep inside of himself, then another, and Kouha reaches up with his free hand to fist it into Koumei's hair, grounding himself with a shaky, eager groan to follow. "God, you've got a nice cock," he pants out, back arching, teeth sinking into his own lip when he twists his fingers to press them deeper. "Really--want it in me--"

Really, maybe there isn’t much difference between wanting to show off and wanting everyone to see him humiliated. At the end of the day, both of them like an audience. Koumei groans, head rolling back as he finally lets himself slide out from between Kouha’s thighs, obeying as well as he can when he’s so damnably worked up, sliding back to rub against Kouha’s hole, giving him everything he wants to play with. “Mmm, and everyone could see...just how easily you toy with me,” he murmurs, eyes lidding at the yank of the hand in his hair. “The whole war council could see how I’m nothing...ahh...nothing but your plaything.”

"You make a good toy," Kouha groans, his face burying into Koumei's neck to nip and bite as he wriggles back, fingers sliding out to grab at his brother's cock instead, whiming at the press and slide of it against him. There's really no one else he'd think to have between his legs like this--no one else good enough, besides. A squirm and press of his hips, and his mouth falls open at that initial stretch, his breath hiccups as he sinks down, eyes fluttering and his nails raking hard against Koumei's scalp. "Fuck," he breathes, chest heaving as he wriggles back the last few inches, muscles bunching tight. "Y-you're just made for me to use, just a toy for me to get off on--"
When he’s with Kouha, Koumei forgets how boring everyone else is. It doesn’t make sense, that he loves things with Kouha he barely tolerates with anyone else, enjoys things he actively avoids anywhere else, clings to things that otherwise make him retch. His fingers dig into Kouha’s ass, and he slides up into that tight heat, eyelids lidding heavily as his breath catches. “Use me,” he begs, trying to hold his hips still, hissing at the slow slide of Kouha around him, down onto him. “Use me, hurt me, let me get you off, let me be a good toy for you--”

"You're such a whore," is the breathless, panting accusation as Kouha ruts down, a hard shove against Koumei's chest pushing him back and holding him there as he plants his knees, working his way up that hard, slick cock. It nearly slides out before he sinks back down with a ragged moan, his fingers bunching into fabric, nearly scratching through it with how hard he claws at Koumei's chest. "What kind of prince just lets his dick be used as a fucktoy, hmm? Or is it worse than that?" he mocks, his eyes rolling back as he shoves a hand underneath his own skirts, stroking a hand over his hard, dripping cock, and sliding those sticky fingers up to Koumei's lips afterwards. "Such a goddamn pervert that you like fucking your brother--I bet you'd throw me over the council table, bet you'd like it if I screamed and clawed bloody trails down your back in front of everyone."

“Yes--”

Koumei’s breath catches, his hips slapping up, and he digs his fingers in hard to Kouha’s ass, yanking him down, wanting to be a good fucktoy, his cock so hard it aches buried deep inside. “You’d--ahh--”

He swallows hard, trying to will himself to hold on, to not come so easily, but the mental images are strong. “You’d like having me there, wouldn’t you? Letting everyone see what I really am? Just--just a slave for you,” he says on a moan, thinking of everyone he respects watching him be used like a toy, just a toy for his little brother to ride and hurt. “They’d see--ahh, this is the only thing my dick is good for,” he groans helplessly, bucking up hard, eyes squeezed shut. “For making you feel good.”

It's a good, really good mental image. Whether he tossed Koumei on the floor or let himself be shoved down onto the table and fucked--ugh, god, it makes him twitch and shudder, makes him writhe down harder onto that thick cock, and Kouha's hand claws its way up, grabbing and squeezing at his brother's throat, using it nearly as leverage to work himself up and down as his back arches with every squeeze of Koumei's fingers. "Go on, then," Kouha breathes, his own cock twitching, throbbing, and he can barely stand it any longer himself. "Hurry up and come, make me even messier, be a good plaything and make it even easier for me to fuck myself on you--"
tops of his thighs, the tops of his stockings so slick and *messy* and lewd.

There's no use in holding back now, not when everything is so slick and hot and the noises when he's squirming down are just *obscene*. Kouha's fingers claw down, and in the back of his mind, he can't help but think that scratches and finger-shaped bruises are worse than bites, but to hell with it. Nothing really matters when he can wriggle himself entirely down onto his brother's cock a last time, a hand careful to hike up his skirts when he comes, more for the *show* of it than anything as he spills hot and messy over Koumei's stomach, chest heaving and eyes lidded. "You've made... a real mess of yourself, you know that?" he lowly pants out. "So much for more fun in town tonight."

"Tomorrow," Koumei groans, a last, frantic thrust up into his brother. "Tomorrow's fine, tonight let's just... be messy." It isn't as if he can do anything else, not when he's slick and pathetic and bruised and scratched and looking as if he's been through a war himself, left as a soiled, tarnished thing, and oh, that image is stronger than he thought. "If you found me on a battlefield," he murmurs with a shiver, eyes alight, "would you bring me back as a prize of war?"

Kouha grins at that, and flops forward with a little wriggle, tracing a fingertip over one of the rapidly darkening bruises on Koumei's neck. "Yeah. No promises I'd treat you *nicely* like I'm supposed to, though. You're so pretty, my men night need a reward for hauling you in."

Koumei shivers all over, and his imagination readily supplies a battlefield, a tent, chains on his wrists and ankles. "Is that what you'd do with a captive prince?" he murmurs, eyes sliding shut at the idea of it, and he can almost *taste* the strange men using his body. "How many men, Ha?"

"It's what I'd do with *you.*" Okay, and he can think of a few others he might want to do it to, too, just because. "And... hmmm, at least my most loyal commanders. That's close to a dozen. They'd want to have at you all night."

Koumei's hips rock up slowly, just the words and the images enough to take him to another place, to capture his imagination, and he has no trouble feeling the *want* for it. "All night? All twelve of them, and you..." His breathing speeds up, and he grinds up against Kouha's ass, feeling it drip slippery onto him. "They wouldn't just *fuck* me, I bet."

Kouha shivers hard, a pointed wriggle down onto his brother's cock making his breath catch. "Oh, no. They'd fuck you, but you look so *pretty* when youbruise--they'd like a chance to whip you, make you scream when they shove you around."

"I'd be a *mess.*" So easy, to forget that they're in a carriage, not in plain view of a dozen commanders, laughing and jeering when he tries to crawl away, kicking him down to the ground and
only wrenching his head up to come on his face. “I’d be all filthy with everyone’s seed on me, and blood, and dirt because you were all taking me on the ground like an animal--”

He bites his lip, vision clouding over a bit, and he can almost smell it. “Just...to be used…”

"Yeah. They'd really fuck you up, Mei," Kouha murmurs, fingers sliding up to give his earring a little tug, just enough for a quick, sharp twist of pain. "If you think they'd be bad, though, you know how I am. You'd be all bloody and bruised and filthy from all of them and I'd still shove your face to the ground and fuck you like a dog."

If Koumei hadn’t been hard before, he is now, rutting up against his brother, breath hot and quick and urgent. “Just--yeah, you’d fuck me up,” he groans, and he can hear the lash cutting into his back, feel the imprint of Kouha’s shoe on top of the welts. “And you’d laugh at me when I screamed, right?”

"You scream like a little bitch." Ahh, that feels good, no matter how he’s sore and achy--Koumei's cock presses against all the right places, and everything's so slick and hot that he shivers hard, eagerly wriggling down as his nails score over his brother's bared throat. "Maybe I’d fuck you on your back, too, like you're some woman we scooped up for a quick fuck. It's all you're good for, having someone rut between your thighs. Would I need to get them to hold you down, or would you be a good dog?"

Koumei thrusts up hard, unable to help it when the images are so strong, letting him slide in slick and aching. “I wouldn’t be a good bitch,” he groans. “Captive--you’d have to force me. Spit in my face, chain my legs apart, give me nothing but your cock and the back of your hand, Ha, please--”

There's no helping the urge to slap him at that, a hard crack across the face that undoubtedly has his vision swimming. "There'd be chains," Kouha eagerly breathes, planting a hand against Koumei's chest to give himself better leverage to squirm and grind down onto his cock. "You'd be so full of cock that you wouldn't be able to breathe. I'd take you until you were screaming, and when I was tired of listening to you, I'd let someone else have your mouth. You look good when you're choking and crying, anyway."

It’s easier when Kouha’s hurting him. Everything’s easier, better, when Kouha’s hurting him.

Koumei rocks up into his brother, eyes shut and seeing nothing but the open plain of battle, feeling Kouha’s cruel hands on him, hearing mocking, disgusted words, feeling the sun beating down on him, and ah, if it’s like this, Kouha will have to chain him up to keep him from riding out to war. “Just holes,” he breathes, chest heaving, and he almost chokes around the words. “J-just holes, just to
Koumei is easy. How anyone can't push these buttons is beyond him, and aside from being easy, he's perfect, with the best reactions and the prettiest, dreamiest expressions when he's so lost in his own mind. "I bet," Kouha smugly, breathlessly says as he leans in, teeth catching on that earring to pull mercilessly, "you'd come all of yourself even then. You'd be hurting and crying and begging for us to stop, and we wouldn't, and you'd be so hard, no better than a whore off the streets."

"Worse," Koumei chokes out. No one does this like Kouha, pulls his strings so easily he forgets it's ever been awkward or difficult, makes him feel like the needy, pathetic thing he only ever does with Kouha, only ever gets satisfied with Kouha. "Worse than a whore. They'd--all of them--leave--it would be only you, they'd say--I'm not worth a fuck, I don't deserve cock--"

"That's because you'd be so messy and fucked up that only I'd know what to do with you." His fingers drag over Koumei's lips, rubbing against them before wriggling their way inside. "You'd be so hard, sucking on my cock. Bet you couldn't even hold your head up by then, I'd have to grab you by the hair and force my way down your throat. You'd probably lose it all over again, coming all over yourself without me even doing a damned thing."

He’s tried to be good today, but none of that matters when Kouha’s hands are in his mouth, Kouha’s so tight around his cock, Kouha’s words go right to his belly and make him writhe. Koumei cries out around those fingers, hips snapping up hard at the thought of being choked in public like that, stained and filthy and used, good only to suck his little brother’s cock and gag around it. He comes, without meaning to, deep inside Kouha again, already slick and filthy, even worse now as he frantically sucks, motions slowing as his vision flickers.

Just this once, Kouha will forgive him--mostly because it feels good being so slick and messy and dripping, because it makes him twist his fingers against Koumei’s tongue all the more, shuddering at the slide of those bruised lips, the eager lave of a hot, wet tongue. "That's a good slut--you wouldn't be able to help yourself, just like that," he croons, a hand stroking back through Koumei’s hair, mockingly soothing in contrast to his words. "When I was done with you, I'd just leave you all chained up, just for someone else to come along and use you, whenever they like."

Perfect.

Koumei sags back against the carriage seat, more thoroughly sated than he can remember being in a long, long time. He gives Kouha’s fingers a last suck, then lets his head fall back as he gasps for breath. “That...yeah. You...thank. You. Thank you. I…” he closes his eyes, a giddy, lightheaded smile on his face as he fades.
Kouha lets him sleep.

Best to let him rest, after something that intense, and he did so well, besides. Kouha takes that time to clean the both of them up, tidying Koumei into at least a semblance of order again and brushing a kiss to the top of his head before doing the same to himself (minus the stockings--they're a little ruined beyond repair).

He dozes a little on the ride back, though something jars him out of his sleep once they roll close to the palace. It's a crackle of unsteady, unstable energy in the air, reeking of magic and unease, and that's not right. Even if he's only been on one campaign, it was a fast, brutal one, and with his childhood friend being a Magi… Kouha knows.

*God dammit*, he dully thinks. So much for a peaceful, fun evening.

"Mei," he lowly mutters, yanking away the ruffled layer of his skirt and unpinning his hair. At least like that, he looks like himself, not as much like a girl. Kouha slides from his seat, grabbing for his sword propped up in a corner--previously stowed there while making their plans, because like hell he will be without his metal vessel for an evening, all recent happenings considered. "Koumei, wake up."

Koumei stirs, already sleeping uneasily from the tension of magic in the air, coming as close to fully awake as he can at the sound of Kouha’s voice. For all his lack of battle experience, he’s fairly sensitive to the feel of it, and as he blinks awake, he calls on his djinn, casting the power out from him to fall on the carriage and nearby street. “Three--four--they’re coming in fast,” he murmurs, feeling his power catch on different personalities. “Surrounding us, they’ve been waiting.” He presses a kiss to Kouha’s shoulder. “Fuck them up hard, okay?"

It's just been one of those months. "Yeah, yeah. You stay put," Kouha mutters, shoulder to the door of the carriage as it rolls to a stop.

He has no doubt this is something Gyokuen has orchestrated, and that makes him angry, angrier still by the time he hears the scuffle outside, their driver succumbing with a yelp. Scowling, Kouha shoves the door open, immediately on the defensive courtesy of the blast of magic slamming into the blade of his sword, and it's only quick thinking that makes him reach a hand back, wrenching Koumei up by the collar and dragging him with him as he dives from the carriage just moments before it bursts into flame.

*Good* magicians. Good magicians, and then a couple with swords, too. Kouha shoves himself to his feet, meeting one in a clash of blades, and wonders exactly how he's supposed to murder these pieces
Gyokuen really does enjoy doing this to him, doesn't she.

This is not the kind of place Koumei likes to be.

He understands battles, can predict them better than almost anyone he’s ever met, but that doesn’t mean he wants to be inside one any more than he wants to be inside one of his favorite tragedy novels. He calls on the power of his djinn, not the best for combat, but at least a lot less useless than he normally is, whirling gracefully into action as tiny knives sprout from his fingers. It won’t last long, his magoi isn’t so plentiful, but it should at least be long enough for Kouha to end these wizards, especially with Koumei’s power draining them slowly of their magoi.

He’d be a piss poor general, Kouha supposes, if he couldn't handle a few assassins that aren’t even good at being subtle. Logic tells him to end the vanguards first, to make the magicians a little more manageable by the time he's done with less bolg to chop through--but when his next slice lands exactly into that, irritation gets the better of him.

A snarl, and Kouha whirls, Solomon's seal flashing on his sword as he cuts through one magician's bolg, not even bothering with the full activation of his vessel when the look on the assassin's face is satisfying enough and short-lived, besides, with the honed edge of his broadsword cutting them nearly in two. There's a swordsman, jumping belatedly to their aid minus a shield, and so that one's next to die, the spray of blood satisfying enough that he imagines it's Gyokuen, bleeding in a heap at his feet.

Koumei sends a small knife into the throat of an assassin, watching him fall to the ground to bleed out, and ah, that’s actually kind of nice, he can see why En and Ha love this so much. He sends another, and it’s a bit intense, really, the way all that magoi feeds into him, makes him more full of energy than he ever remembers being. Usually he lets it drain off whenever he uses his djinn, but right now, all he can think about is not being a burden to Kouha, not making it so he can’t do what he needs to do.

He spares Kouha a glance, and freezes mid-whirl. The sight of Kouha slicing through a grown man with his sword extended is breathtaking, but what he sees is the assassin behind him, running forward. Koumei throws a knife, but the man blocks it with a surge of magic, and even though he calls out, there’s no way Kouha will be able to turn around fast enough, not with his sword that size.

For someone so lazy, Koumei can move fast, when he has reason to.
He feels the blade as an *impact* more than anything, like a hard punch to his gut instead of the slice it is, and he strikes an arm out just far enough to open a gash in the man’s throat before leaning back against his brother. “You got this?” he asks, breathing heavy, hoping Kouha won’t notice until he’s taken care of everything he needs to.

It was stupid of him, in the end, to think he could be some use.

"Just one last bitch." The problem lies in how he wants her alive—at least, for half a second, and she's already trying to run. Kouha growls, shoving away from Koumei, and the swing of his sword literally cuts the magician's legs out from underneath her, sending her catapulting head-over-heel to the ground.

"Who sent you?" is his breathless demand as he stalks over, chest heaving more from anger than any exertion, and it's with a cross growl that he realizes, through her whimpers of pain, that she's already done a *fine* job of biting off her tongue. "Damn it all, useless witch."

Her head rolls, and Kouha turns away, rapidly scanning the area for any others that might be lurking about before turning his attention back to Koumei. It's a belated thing that he notices his own back is bloody, and he slides a hand back, frowning at the mess of it before it *clicks*, cold and dreadful.

He's never thrown his sword aside so fast in his life. "You should have *said something*—damn it, Mei--" Like hell he can *see* anything out here, and so Kouha is fast to get his arms underneath his brother, hauling him up with little effort. That's a *lot* of blood. *Trying not to think about that, it's fine, he'll be fine.*

Good, Kouha’s finished up. He must have, if he’s here, because Koumei’s made damned sure he didn’t utter a noise, even if he had to grit his teeth so hard his jaw popped. “‘s fine,” he mumbles, blinking up at Kouha, and he’d sort of expected everything to be blurrier. It’s in an oddly sharp focus, and he reaches up to touch Kouha’s face. “I’m fine,” he says again, even if it’s a little hard to speak with his face going so cold. “There’s—couple things I need to tell you, for En--”

"I'm going to fucking punch you."

Koumei's just being a drama queen. That's *definitely* what he's going on about. At least, that's what Kouha tells himself until he fairly kicks open the palace doors, bringing servants rushing and milling about—armed with kitchen knives, something he'd find exceedingly cute any other time—and he snarls out a few commands to the guards to *watch the fucking perimeter already* before letting
himself be dragged further into the light.

Yeah. Okay. That definitely is a lot of blood.

"How well can you heal?" It's less a question, more of a you're going to do this and do it to the best of your ability regardless when he grabs hold of the most powerful, as far as he's observed, of his new servants after carefully deposits Koumei on the nearest chaise. "Because he is not allowed to die."

The girl's face is a study in contradictions, terrified of the possibility of failure, thrilled at finally getting a chance to prove herself to the prince. "I'll do my best even if it kills me, milord," she promises, and grabs the nearest girls, sending them for hot water and bandages, pulling a sprinkling of magic-infused herbs out of her pouch.

"I’m not going to die," Koumei mutters, even though yes, he admits that it doesn’t exactly look promising. “Look, just sit down and let me talk to you, there are things I need to say just in case.”

Kouha still contemplates punching him, even as he forgoes yanking up a seat and instead sits down on the furniture's edge, as out of the way as he can be, all things considered. "You're not going to die," is the flat retort, and Kouha's face twists, trying very, very hard not to blame himself for this more and more by the minute. No, it's Gyokuen. It's her, this is her fault, and he's not sure he's going to be able to return to the Imperial Palace and not murder her on sight. "If you tell me things, En will be angry."

“I don’t give a shit if he’s angry, I’m trying to keep you safe,” Koumei grinds out. He hisses out a breath through his teeth, trying to keep focused instead of relaxing into the sleep his body is so sure it wants. Not now, just for a little longer, then I can sleep knowing he’s going to be fine. “Anything you need, it’s in my room, things you need to know if I can’t--if I can’t be--”

He doesn’t want to say it. The thought of dying isn’t so bad, but of leaving Kouha alone, knowing how their family is, is unbearable. “Fuck it,” he groans, reaching out a hand. “Too much work, I’ll just live.”

"Dumbass, look at what trying to keep me safe got you already," Kouha mutters, immediately reaching out to grab Koumei's hand and squeeze tightly. "You're not allowed to die, I just told you. Who the hell is going to babysit my kids? Hey, how does it look?" He's trying not to snarl, because that never accomplishes anything with servants, least of all female ones.
This particular servant, fortunately, seems to thrive under pressure. “It’s a very deep cut, your Highness, I think the blade went entirely through him, but if I can get it all patched back up and he doesn’t turn septic, I think he’ll pull through.”

Koumei gives his brother’s hand as much of a squeeze as he can. Odd, he supposes, that he’s not screaming now when he’s so good at it recreationally, but everything is sort of quiet now. “Don’t be dumb, I’d have done it again. En needs you.”

Right. That’s good news. Kouha likes good news a lot these days. "Good girl," is all he can manage for praise right then around his exhale of relief, and he tightens his grasp on Koumei’s hand. "You stop being fucking dumb. I would’ve been fine, you don’t just go stepping in front of swords! En needs you, too, and--" A hard, dry swallow follows. So do I.

It doesn’t matter what Kouha says. Knowing he’d lived if Kouha had died, from his own inaction—well, that would have been a hundred times worse than dying, so it doesn’t matter.

“Milord,” the girl says, “I’ll need you to bite on this, it’ll hurt quite a bit when I stitch your guts back in.”

Koumei gives his brother a weak smile, and bites down on the leather.

Kouha refrains from making a pain tolerance joke. "You'll be fine,” he mumbles, more for his own comfort than anything, and gives Koumei’s hand another squeeze. "And if this gets worse, I'll ride back to the Imperial City myself and drag that useless Magi over here to fix you." Except there’s no way in hell he’ll leave Koumei’s side any time soon. Whatever, no use nitpicking it.

After feeling what the girl is doing, the odd sensation of the needle tugging at the sides of his skin, Koumei lets the leather fall out of his mouth, disinterested. “I…” He swallows, and admits the truth. “I think you’ll need to. Or someone will.”

“Oh!” The girl’s mouth drops open, and her hand is suddenly in a very oddly intimate place, making Koumei want to squirm in discomfort. “I didn’t see--” She looks up, meeting Kouha’s eyes, a little terrified. “His spleen was blocking it, but there’s a small tear in one of his intestines, he could go septic as soon as tomorrow.”

Another servant throws herself at Kouha’s feet. “My lord, I’m a fast and skilled rider, send me to the capital!”
"Go." He doesn't even need to think about giving the command, not when he suddenly feels so very, very cold. "Take my horse, she's the fastest we've got, and don't stop until you get there." Judal, you better fucking be there. Depending on that unpredictable, airheaded-at-best Magi is one of the most nerve-wracking things Kouha has done in awhile.

Koumei squeezes his brother's hand the best he can, even though the fact that Kouha’s fingers feel so hot tells him his own must be very, very cold right now. “I’ll try as hard as I can,” he says quietly. “And you know me. I don’t do that very often.”

"You better." Kouha sucks in a steadying breath, refusing to let his hand shake no matter how honestly terrified he is. Battles he can do. Bloodshed and war and people dying around him--he can do all of that, no matter how the latter stings. Koumei isn't people, though. "I'll give you some of magoi. That should help, right?" It certainly can't hinder, at this rate. "Just... yeah." Don't die.

“Milord,” the girl says hesitantly, “it’ll be much better if I can put him to sleep for a few hours, so his body can try and heal itself.”

Koumei nods, laying back and closing his eyes. “Don't worry, Ha. I won’t leave you.”

On the road, a young servant swells with purpose, pushing a prince’s best horse to foundering.
There are at least a dozen things he'd rather be doing.

Of course, he's apparently not allowed to until this is done and over with, or so says Kouen, glaring like Judal hasn't seen him glare in some time, grabbing him by the back of his shirt to bodily throw him onto a magic carpet and send him in the direction of the Winter Palace. It rubs him the wrong way, as it always does when he's given such sharp, absolute orders, but Judal goes, anyway, annoyed at how the winds dry out his skin and hair by the time he arrives.

He remembers this place. Boring at best, nothing like the capital, and Judal waltzes inside rather leisurely before a servant grabs him—rude—and bodily drags him down the hall.

"Ah, Kouha! Your servant wasn't really clear about who was dying, I guess you're the one that's fine—"

The glare he receives shuts him up, a little too reminiscent of Kouen's own stare when he was tossed onto the carpet and sent out. Judal pauses, glances over at Koumei—pale and sweat-soaked, shivering no matter the blankets packed around him. "… You know, I'm really not a healer. Just in theory—"

"You're going to save him, or I'm going to kill you."

I doubt it is on the tip of Judal's tongue, though the stare Kouha gives him makes him wonder.

Koumei dreams.

Sometimes it’s real and sometimes it’s not, or at least that’s what he thinks when everything is so swirly. He dreams, and sees things, people, in between cold so strong it feels like he’s at the arctic, except that it’s taking him from the inside out, not the normal way around.

Sometimes he can see Kouha, but sometimes Kouha isn’t real, blowing in the wind like the rest of the figments, and he hears words like gone septic and miracle if he lasts the night, hears slaps and tears and anger, and he hopes those are the dreams and not the real things.
When he sees Judal’s face, mad red eyes peering down at his stomach, he’s not sure whether he wants it to be real or not. “Just--” he grits the words out through his teeth, fumbling for Kouha’s hand, but he can’t find it--“don’t let--don’t want--not a black djinn--promise--”

Kouha immediately grabs at his brother's hand, squeezing it tight within both of his own. "He's going to heal you, Mei, just relax and trust me," he begs, unsure if Koumei can really hear him, eyes flicking sideways to Judal again. "Well?"

"… Bad," Judal admits, and he yanks up a stool as he settles down, immediately pulling water from the air with an ease that Kouha can never not find at least a little bit fascinating. "But I think I got here in time. We'll find out, at any rate."

It's hard not letting his lower lip tremble. "There's nothing to find out. You will save him."

Judal bites back an aggravated noise at that, but doesn't argue. "Yeah. Just be quiet, I need to think, I haven't done this in awhile."

If there’s anyone Koumei doesn’t trust, it’s Judal. In her own way, he trusts Gyokuen more, at least feels like her behavior is predictably deplorable, while Judal is always a fucking mystery. One day, he’d warned En over and over, he’ll decide that it’s more fun to rip the Kou Empire apart rather than serving it, and we’ve already shown him all our weak spots.

En hadn’t really listened, no one had, and now Koumei’s life is in Judal’s hands. He tries to breathe, tries to stay awake as much as he can, determined to make sure he dies first if Judal shows the slightest inkling of starting to turn him into a black djinn.

"This is going to hurt." It probably already does, just using the first of his magic to start purifying and all but suck out the infection. Annoying, how precise he has to be. Judal sighs. "Might be better if he's asleep."

"… Don’t think he wants to be." Don't worry, I'll take care of you, I won't let him do anything to you except fix you. Kouha's thumbs rub in slow, soothing circles over the back of Koumei's hand.

"Well, whatever, then."

It takes time, too much, as far as Judal is concerned, after a carpet ride that already has him feeling
drained and lightheaded. Ah, he's hungry. Really hungry, by the time a little color starts returning to Koumei's skin. "I deserve a banquet for this."

"Not until he's entirely well," Kouha mutters, the back of his hand sliding over Koumei's forehead. At least he isn't completely burning up now.

There's pain.

Koumei's never been terribly afraid of pain, not even the kind that comes like this, from battle and in intense healing instead of from the back of a man's hand, but he can see why people are. It shuts down his senses, even burns away some of the fever, reducing everything into a kind of red-and-white hot internal screaming that never lets up, everything cold and hot at once, making him sweat, making him tremble. At least it makes him feel alive, even if it's for the last time, instead of the awful half-dead feeling he's had until now.

At least his eyes are working again, and he can see Kouha's face.

"Hey," Kouha breathes, voice heavy with relief. "There we go. Sure you don't wanna sleep, Mei? It's gotta be hurting like a bitch."

"How the hell did this even happen? Haven't ever seen you near a battlefield… well, except when Kouen dragged your ass out," Judal muses as he works.

Kouha's jaw tightens a little at that. "Someone sent assassins after us."

"Ooh? Wow, Kouha. You've got shit luck lately, don't you?"

Shit luck, or a horrible step-mother. Might as well be one and the same. "Yeah. We'll go with that."

Koumei's teeth aren't chattering anymore. He's pretty sure they were earlier, so that feels like quite an accomplishment, and he manages to grind out, "Want to stay." He means stay awake, but it's more than that in any case, and it works for pretty much everything he wants right now. Kouha isn't ready, not to be without him. He's not subtle enough, not observant enough, he's entirely too likable to survive, and the thought of Kouha dying because Koumei wasn't there to protect him somehow is worse than any of the pain.
“Hey.” He clutches at Kouha’s hand, talking to keep himself focused on something besides the pain boiling his insides. “You know when someone--broke my desk and--you said it was the servant and--I had her beaten? Knew it was you.” Kouha had been maybe six years old, with big sad eyes and an infectious grin.

Kouha groans a little at that, though at least Koumei is talking coherently now. "I had forgotten about that. Geez, Mei, don't remind me of when I was so mean to those girls." He spares an annoyed glance at Judal. "Can't you do something about the pain?" If Koumei is hurting, and he is, he can see it clear as day on his brother's face, Kouha doesn't even want to imagine it.

"Do you want me to fix him or not?" Judal crossly mutters, lifting his gaze only for a moment. "I can't do both right now."

"Some Magi you are." An insult to the ego always seems to make Judal work a little harder, and now is no exception, with another spell quickly woven and applied, no matter how irritably.

The sudden lack of pain is almost like an opiate, and Koumei almost faints in relief. He sags back against the bed, every muscle relaxing, and even if it still feels odd, like fish nibbling at his toes underwater, at least it doesn’t feel like he’s being slowly liquefied in acid. His face goes slack with the relief, and the shivering finally stops. “Ahh. Thank you.”

He reaches up, stroking the back of his hand over Kouha’s face. “You’re wrong, you know. I think you’d be a great Emperor.”

"You're just saying that because you'd rather be my advisor than En's," Kouha gently teases, leaning his head down as his hand slides up, resting against Koumei's to hold it in place. "I don't want to be an Emperor, though. Let En do that, I'd rather just keep to the battlefields. Less sitting on a throne all day, much more fun."

Koumei shakes his head, eyes glazed now that he doesn’t have the pain to keep him focused. “Don’t mean instead of him. Just...if you had to. You're both good. Good brothers, good kings. Don’t let him make you take a wife, you’re too good for a woman.”

At that, Kouha has to laugh. "I'll pass on all counts, then. Mei, just sleep, you're getting all weird," he murmurs, thumb dragging over the dusting of freckles along one cheekbone.
"More like you two are getting all gross."

"Judal, shut the fuck up or I'll castrate your Sindrian boyfriend."

Koumei laughs at that, a long slow exhale, before sinking into blissful unconsciousness so deep he’s not entirely sure it isn’t death.

But Kouha’s holding his hand and touching his face, so there are worse ways to go.

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Kouen told him to stay for a few weeks.

It isn’t his fault that they were attacked by assassins and Koumei nearly died, though. It certainly isn’t his fault that bodies decompose quickly in the heat, either, and so that, above all else, is why he rides hard back to the capital after having convinced Judal to stay at his brother’s side for the duration of his healing (with a prolonged sleeping spell in place, at that).

He's dusty, tired, annoyed by the time he arrives at the palace, shoving the horse's reins into the nearest, terribly surprised servant's hands. The sack over his shoulder draws more than a few stares, considering how blood-soaked it is, and Kouha hardly waits for an invitation before simply shoving open the doors to the throne room.

"My apologies for the interruption." He's not sorry. Not at all. He's definitely not sorry for the gasps that he draws from a few servants and slaves and guards alike when he simply sends a quartet of heads rolling over the floor. "I figured if there was any good place to start regarding the identity of these assassins, it would be here."

Kouen has been more pleased with his youngest brother.

He leans back from where he’d been murmuring, fixing his eyes on Kouha, trying to send some kind of message that this isn’t the time, but Kouha hardly even looks at him.

Gyokuen’s eyes glint as she looks down, smiling at the boy. “My beloved son, you’ve returned
from...wherever. And you brought a present? Will you ever return with any live humans at your side?"

"Don't," Kouha bites out, what remains of his hold on his temper already fraying, "call me your son. My real mother was a concubine and she had more class than you."

There's a snigger from one of his brother's generals--thank god they still agree with him--and Kouha reaches down, fisting a hand into the blood-caked hair of one of the assassins to hoist the head up. "Well? I don't suppose this face rings a bell for anyone?"

Hakuei, to Kouen's left, tries very, very hard not to bury her face into one hand. *You're going to need to stop him*, is the look she fixes upon Kouen instead.

Even for a week, Kouen can’t trust his younger brother to stay quiet. That’s all right, Kouha is useful for other things, and it’s not like he can blame the kid for being attacked after all. He steps forward as he feels the cold rolling off Gyokuen in waves, her anger sharpening, forming a point. “Your Majesty, allow me to remove Kouha. He’s obviously in distress.”

Her mouth is already open, magic glinting on her finger, but at Kouen’s words she relaxes back into a poisonous smile. “Of course, my darling son. You always know best, don’t you?”

Kouen puts a large hand on Kouha’s shoulder. “Come on.”

"No." Kouha's teeth grit, and he shoves away his brother's hand. "You know who they are!" he snaps at Gyokuen, throwing the head forward to make sure it rolls to a stop at her feet. "You sent them, you witch! Try it again, come at me yourself if you're such a great magician, it'll be your head that rolls next time!"

Hakuei definitely buries her face into one hand that time.

“I have been patient with you,” Gyokuen says softly, and Kouen doesn’t wait to hear more. He stoops, picking Kouha up over one shoulder.

“My apologies, Mother,” he says, knowing how she likes it when he refers to her that way, and sure enough, she dispels the magic. He holds with a grip like iron, no matter how Kouha thrashes. “We’ll be leaving now.”
Without listening to another protest, he simply leaves, Kouha his cargo.

"Put me *down!* I'll fucking cut her head off, I swear to fucking *god*--"

Kouen's grip is like a goddamn *vice*, though, and no matter how strong Kouha thinks he is, his brother has that times a dozen--perhaps especially so, when he's clawing and biting and kicking. He *seethes*, chest heaving, hands balling into fists against Kouen's back. "Put me *down*, En!"

Kouen makes it to the nearest private room, an unused office, kicks open the door, and dumps his brother on the floor, sealing the door shut with a strong arm and a flash of magoi. "You are being *careless,*" he hisses. "Can I not trust you with a *single* instruction, no matter how *simple*?"

Kouha hisses back through clenched teeth as he claws his way to his feet. "She sent *assassins* after us!" he spits out. "You want me to be subtle--well, she's definitely not anymore, so why should I be? She tried to *kill* me! *Worse,* Mei nearly *did* die!"

“I want you to do as you’re told!” Kouen folds his arms over his chest, glaring down at his younger brother. “How many enemies does our family have, Kouha?”

"I don't know, a lot!" Kouha snaps back. "What does it *matter,* she's right there, just let me kill her already before she kills any of us!"

Kouen slams his hand into the wall, hard enough that the wall trembles. “You will *listen* to me or I will assume you don’t need your *ears!* *I am protecting you!* And Mei, and Ei, and everyone! So sit down, close your mouth, and listen to what I have to say before I beat it into you!”

Kouha's mouth opens to retort before he shuts it again, lower lip trembling, and he sinks back onto his heels, his hands clenched tightly into fists at his sides. "*Fine.* I'm *listening.*"

Kouen takes a deep breath. It’s not Kouha’s fault, really. He’s so *young,* and he doesn’t have a mind for subtlety. “In our lives,” he says quietly, “in the life of any great family that is powerful, ambitious, and clever, we will make enemies. Lots of them. What matters is *how* we deal with those enemies. If someone attacks us, and we kill that person, what does the next man do, Kouha?”
"I don't know. Tries to attack us after they're through. But that's nothing new, it's--it's not like we can't just keep getting rid of them," Kouha protests. "It's better than waiting for them to kill us first!"

“Or,” Kouen says slowly, taking a knee to put himself on a level with his younger brother, “we can make an example out of them. Show everyone that we are not to be trifled with, and they are fools to come against us without knowing that we will humiliate and destroy everything they are, everything they have ever loved, without mercy.” He reaches a hand out, laying it on Kouha’s shoulder. “And we will show them the folly of attacking our loved ones who can’t defend themselves.”

Making a game out of this, a long one that makes him wait, is probably what Kouha is the worst at, and he knows it.

His hands clench again, knuckles white as his hands shake. "If she sends another assassin after us," he slowly, unsteadily says, "I don't think I'm going to be able to stop myself. If she had killed Mei--"

“You’re being too easy on her.” Kouen’s voice is low, angry, and heated. “She deserves so much worse than death, and I will see her have it, not in least because it will make any idiot who wants to fight us think they can distract us and rattle us and make us into fools by attacking our loved ones. And,” he adds, eyes dark, “for almost killing Mei.”

A low, frustrated noise leaves Kouha's throat. "I hate her," he helplessly says, knowing he sounds like a child but unable to help it. He finally meets Kouen's eyes, blinking rapidly to keep hot, angry tears from escaping. "I hate her. She's going after me on purpose now. What am I supposed to do? If I mess up--I already messed up, that's why Mei is like this--"

“So you won’t mess up again. Will you?” Kouen squeezes his brother’s shoulder, more kindly than before. “You’re a strong fighter, Ha. She’s afraid of you, or she wouldn’t be going after you. Can you do it?” He tilts his head, unsure. “If you don’t think you can keep yourself and Mei safe, you’d better come home.”

"No! No, I can do it, I just…” He huffs out a hot, tired breath. "It'd be a lot easier, if I could just go ahead and kill her." But that's a given, isn't it?

“Easier today. Not easier next year, when someone realizes the best way to get you so angry you forget your common sense is to go after Mei.” He raises his eyebrows. “Then what?”

Kouha bites his lip at that. "… I don't know. I didn't… that's why I don't want him in the middle of
things like this. He doesn't *listen* to me, when I tell him he's not suited for wars or fighting at all.*

“You can’t protect him, except by treating him as nothing more than your brother.” Kouen’s eyes have a warning in them. “He’s involved. He’s a prince of Kou, and he’s no imbecile nor invalid. Maybe this will inspire him to pick up swordsmanship again.”

”Yeah, and my hair's gonna turn the same shade of red as yours overnight,” Kouha snorts, shaking his head. "I'm *trying*. I remembered what you said, about not letting her *find out.*"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Kouen folds his arms. “You want to keep both of your heads on your shoulders, try listening to me and *behaving*. Which is it, do you not think I have your best interests at heart, or do you not think I can manage what I’ve promised?"

"It's none of those things! I just… I really, really hate her.” Kouha sucks in a shaky breath. "And I want to kill her. But… I won't.* No matter how I really, really fucking want to right now.* But only because you're telling me not to. And if she calls me her *son* again, I--"

“Stop thinking about just yourself for once. This is about *all* of us, and when you rush in, you endanger your entire family, even those who don’t exist yet.” Ah, best stay away from that subject, after what Hakuei had said that morning. “I can trust you? You’ve said so before, but…”

"I *am* thinking about all of us, that's why I want her *dead.*" Ugh, his head hurts. Kouha exhales long and hard. "I'm not gonna do anything," he mumbles, shutting his eyes briefly. "No matter how much I want to."

“The time will come. And soon.” Kouen lets his voice get soft, fond, as the images form in front of his eyes. “And there will be nothing she can do. She’ll lose everything she loves, and be reduced to nothing, less than nothing, helpless and weak and *sorry* but there will be no one to save her.”

"Good. I want her to suffer *a lot.* *Breathe.* Breathing is a thing he can do. "Sorry. I'm really sorry. She just… no one has ever made me so *angry.*"

“Believe me, I know. And if all goes according to plan, she won’t be the last person you hate to the very depth of her being.” Kouen pulls back, straightening his hair. “It will be a long life, Kouha. I want you alive for all of it, you and Mei both. I need you by my side.”
Kouha manages a little nod, no matter how it still makes him feel sour, hollow to agree to not killing her right now. I want to bring her head back on a damned stake, I want Mei to wake up to the sight of that, damn it all. "… In other news," he dully supplies, "your Magi is a bitch. What's up his ass lately?" Or rather, what isn't.

“He did as he was told, didn’t he? Or I’ll give him something to really whine about.” Kouen scowls. “He’s been antsy, wants to ride out to the front lines with me and tear a chasm in the ground with raw magoi. I’ll have to indulge him soon.”

"He did, but he was difficult about it. And it took me bribing him to stay and keep an eye on Mei.” Kouha snorts, frowning at the memory. "I wonder if it's just because they don't get along… or if he's just antsy like you said. Normally, he's in Sindria a damned week out of every month, so I guess that's it. Weirdo."

“I know Mei found babysitting him to be quite a challenge,” Kouen admits. “Moreso than you, and that’s saying something.”

"Hey, I was good!” Well. For Koumei, at least. "Mei's under a sleeping spell still," he allows with a grimace. "He was… still is… in bad shape."

Kouen sits slowly on the floor, resting his back against the door. It’s something he hasn’t wanted to think so much about, hasn’t needed to, because Judal has things under control, doesn’t he? It’s one of the reasons it’s good to keep him around, even when part of him wonders just how far Judal has steered him. “I only heard that he was near death. The servant...well, you know you can’t truly trust anyone who isn’t family.”

"If Judal had been a moment later…” Better not to say it, lest he jinx it entirely. Kouha sucks in a slow breath, rocking backwards to lean against the desk behind him. "The servants are good. Don't worry about them, they've proven their worth in spades at this point." That's not to say he'll trust them with everything, but anything at this point is something to count on. "I don't know. I can deal with Judal better than most of these idiots, but he's definitely distracted. Pet his hair or something, En, you know he's like a big cat. Moody as one, at any rate."

“Don’t tell me who to pet,” Kouen mutters in irritation, though it’s true enough that he’s neglected Judal a bit lately, and it’s been far too long since he took the young man to his bed, even to curl up at his side to have his hair stroked as he read. Ah, there’s time enough to manage that, and they’ll be riding to war together soon enough. By then, Hakuei will be safely gone, and the thought of that hurts him as much as anything. “Things will change, soon. I can’t tell you what will change them, not now that someone knows your weak spot, but you’ll know when it starts.”
"She doesn't know my weak spot," is Kouha's immediate protest, straightening from where he leans. "It's not like I screamed about Mei specifically or anything!" Of course, now he's all the more paranoid, and shifts restlessly. "You'll contact me, as soon as you need me back? I'll... I won't come back until then, I promise."

“I’ll contact you the first second we move. Believe me, I’ll want the two of you at my side.” Kouen stands, dusting himself off, and straightens his robes. “I doubt anything could keep you safe here, tonight. There’s a hint of her magic about you. Ride hard, and make Judal take care of it, will you? Tell him….tell him to hurry up and heal Mei, I have something fun to do with him.”

Definitely paranoid now. He's not stepping a foot back into the Winter Palace until Judal wipes him clean. "Yeah. I mean--yes, I'll tell him." He feels rather like a child chastised all over again, but that's to be expected, he supposes. Kouha steadies himself with another, slow breath. "I..." A hard swallow. "I won't let this happen again." No matter how I still want to tear her limb from limb.

“Good. I was impressed, you know, with how well you dealt with those assassins. I heard about it from your servant’s tales of your exploits, very impressive.” He smiles. “Mei has a formidable guardian. I trust you to take care of my best three subordinates.”

Right. If Gyokuen ends up lashing out at him, who is going to take care of Koumei in particular? Kouha calms his still-racing mind a bit with those thoughts, unable to help the little swell of pride that makes him stand a bit straighter. "I won't let your trust be in vain," he earnestly replies, a short bow of his head following. "If that's all, I'll ride fast back to the Winter Palace."

Kouen bows gravely to him in return. “Ride hard, brother. Gods of our fathers speed you safely on your way. And tell Mei if he doesn’t get better I’ll kill him myself.”

Kouha strangles a stressed noise at that. "I'll... tell him."

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It feels like an eternity.

Then Koumei’s eyes slit open, and when wakefulness comes, it’s as if he was never asleep at all.

He feels oddly musty, as if it really has been a year since he’s been properly awake, properly clean,
and the memory of pain from his long sleep keeps him from stretching. Slowly, gingerly, he reaches a hand to his stomach and the wound—he remembers the wound—and runs a thumb down what feels like no more than a thick scar. Maybe the Magi is good for something after all, he thinks humorlessly, remembering the smell of the man, the mad red eyes above him in his fever dreams.

“Ha.” It might be an unintelligible croak, a nonsense sound, but it isn’t.

Kouha jerks, stirring abruptly from where he's simply flopped himself down on the floor, chin propped atop the edge of his brother's bed. There's no better resting place that allows him to keep watch, after all; a chair was all right for a bit until he toppled out of it in his sleep, and actually curling up in the bed with Koumei is no good, lest he jar the man while he's sleeping…

Ah, he's sore, though, and he stretches with a spasm that twitches up through his neck. Worth it, because Mei is awake. "Hey," he sighs, stretching his arms forward as he doesn't quite bother rising yet. "You look like you feel better."

"Lots better." There’s still a bone-deep soreness that feels as if he’s been run over a few times by a chariot and the horses too, but Koumei sort of remembers overhearing his father talking to Kouen about that sort of thing when he’d taken his first war wound, telling him how his body would rebuild itself by taking energy from the healthy parts.

He reaches a hand out, smiling when his arm actually works, and rests it on Kouha’s head, stroking his hair gently. “Told you I’d be fine.”

Kouha's brow furrows. "Actually," he mutters, and he wriggles his fingers before slowly hauling himself up onto the bed, "you said a lot about dying. And a lot of other weird things."

“That doesn’t count, I was delirious.” Koumei threads his fingers with Kouha’s, squeezing his hands gently. “You didn’t stay the whole time, did you? I’m boring enough company for you when I’m awake.”

He's probably going to get scolded for this. "… Just for a day. Otherwise, I stayed." Kouha slowly wriggles himself closer, hesitantly pulling one hand away to poke at Koumei's belly. "Does it hurt?"

Koumei wrinkles his nose. “You’d do it anyway no matter what I said. It’s fine, less than a papercut.” Probably more, a lot more, but it’s always hard to tell with his pain tolerance. “Did someone give me opium? I know I dreamed, and it didn’t hurt the whole time, but I can’t remember.”
"No, I think Judal gave you the magic equivalent, though," Kouha mutters, giving Koumei a last, wary look-over before simply flopping himself forward, burrowing himself down onto his chest. "Went back to the Imperial City," he admits on a grumble. "I was going to kill that bitch, I swear. Got yelled at instead."

“Hmm, did you?” Koumei feels like he should probably be angry, but En has no doubt taken care of that. He wraps an arm around Kouha instead, closing his eyes as he brushes a kiss across the top of Kouha’s head. “Let me guess, he has plans, asking about them is dangerous or foolish or whatever, and you’re to be a good boy and sit on your hands and try not to die.”

"… Yeah. All that and worse. I kind of… threw severed heads at her." Kouha winces, butting his head up underneath Koumei's chin. "In the throne room." He decides not to tell his brother about how he was carried out like a five year old.

“I knew I neglected to put something in your decorum curriculum. No severed heads inside, they stain the carpet.” It’s possible he’s still just slightly loopy from all the time in bed. “It’s fine, at least you’re here and I’m alive and they’re dead, right? It can’t be too much longer until En makes good on his promise.”

It's impossible not to giggle at that, at least. "More like another month, I bet," Kouha whines all the same, carefully unfolding himself and stretching out atop his brother with a sigh. "I really hate this. I hated it before, but I hate it more now after this."

“You hate being here alone with me?” Koumei slowly winds a strand of hair around one finger, starting at the end and working his way up to Kouha’s scalp, giving it a playful tug. “You’ll have a lot more fun if you enjoy yourself instead of moping around. Once I’m up you can drag me to the Ice Lake, all right? Even at this time of year it should be good for skating.” And I can watch and eat chestnuts.

"… You really are still out of it," Kouha sighs at him, butting his face firmly into Koumei's neck. "I think En's wearing off on me. I'm not anywhere as good at having fun like I used to be." Not when I'm so worried about things happening to people all the time now.

“One En is enough for any family,” Koumei says firmly. No matter how many times he’s tried to get Kouha to calm down, to be more serious, this isn’t what he wants. En is the planner, Koumei the worrier, and Kouha is supposed to be the only one with a smile. He strokes the young man’s hair, thankful beyond words that Kouha’s still fine, that he’d been quick enough, that they’re both alive. “If you stay alive by turning into me or him, our whole family is doomed to be boring like us. What was the look on her face like, when you threw the heads at her?”
"Like she was about to torch me." It's a little difficult not to grin when he says it, and he rolls, flopping onto his stomach on top of Koumei's chest instead. "I might have, ah, told her that my mother had more class than she did. And then threw the heads at her then. They were already kind of rotting, so it was pretty gross."

Koumei sighs wistfully. He can almost picture it, especially Kouha's adorable angry face. "I wish I could have seen that. You're right, you know. I know you didn't know her long, but your mother had far more class than that witch. She'd have been proud of you."

"Well, it made En's generals laugh, at least..." Kouha trails off on a sigh, dropping his head forward and into Koumei's neck. "I'll do something similar again later, then, so you can see and laugh. You know, when I'm allowed to. Ugh, I hate her so much, she tried calling me her beloved son and it was disgusting."

"Ah, do it to someone else." Koumei's nails scratch slowly down Koumei's neck and upper back, loving the feel of him so close, the comforting weight so close to how it would be when Kouha climbed on him while he was reading, so many years ago. "She doesn't deserve it, and I don't want her even looking at you. You can throw severed heads at someone less creepy."

"Maybe En will let me cut off her head," Kouha wistfully murmurs, trailing off into a rumbling, purring exhale at the slide and scrape of Koumei's nails against him. "Or maybe I can just quit. Kinda want to right now, I'll just laze around with you all day instead."

Koumei wants to remind him that it's not really quitting if he's been ordered to take a vacation, and besides, he'll go running gleefully back to En's side the second he calls, but he bites his tongue on that. "Good. I know I'll heal a lot better when I can gnaw on you whenever I want."

Kouha growls low in the back of his throat at that. "You're already healed up," he mumbles, his pout almost audible. "Just kinda weird and loopy."

Koumei laughs, because it's true, and trails his nails up before dragging them down again. "Fine, you can chew on me if you prefer. You're going to make me think you're not happy to see me."

"Nooo, I'm really happy," Kouha protests, wriggling down with a huffy little whine to follow. "I just--ahhh, if you don't quit it... I'm gonna start gnawing on you."
“And you’re trying to protect my honor?” Koumei teases, threading his fingers into Kouha’s hair, tugging his head back. “Or you think I’m still too much of an invalid to handle you? That doesn’t sound like the boy who tried to ride me like a pony when I had the summer plague three years ago.”

"You still weren't about to die, then, you were just sort of… delirious. And weirder than usual." He sticks out his tongue, sliding his own hands up to pull at the heavy, loose fall of Koumei's hair. "I don't wanna mess you up right now," he quietly admits. "Gyokuen already did a pretty good job of that."

Koumei reaches out to flick the end of Kouha’s tongue. “I can give you a good time without our usual fun,” he murmurs. “Just because I got hurt is no reason for you to be bored. That is….if you think you can behave yourself a bit?”

Kouha bites--well, nibbles really, a sigh escaping through his nose. "I'm not gonna be bored," he says, reaching up to wrap his fingers around Koumei's wrist, trailing his fingers down it. "And you're the only person I like behaving myself for, really."

“I like it when you squirm around,” Koumei murmurs, stroking his fingers gently over every part of Kouha he can touch. “Especially when you’re on top of me. Want to have a little fun?”

He still wants to hesitate, less worried about his own self-control and more so about exactly how healthy Koumei is. He's not gonna break, Kouha has to remind himself, a mental slap or two another reminder that Mei is a lot tougher than he looks, considering all the abuse he takes anyway. It's just--this time was a little too close for comfort.

"… Yeah." In a way, though, it makes him want that much more. Kouha shivers, dropping his head down to bury it back into the side of Koumei's neck, only lifting it a bit to catch at his earring and tug. "Mei's still a pervert either way, hmm?" he teasingly murmurs. "You just wanna be able to grab at my thighs."

“I can’t help it when your legs are so pretty,” Koumei murmurs, shivering at the brush of his little brother’s teeth. He stretches out, the pain less obnoxious and far more of a dull thud, pulsing just under his skin. “Did you bring any more of your pretty stockings when you went home, or was that just a business trip?”

A mournful sigh follows that. "Just a business trip, sorry." Kouha pushes himself up with a stretch, wriggling back a bit to better straddle his brother's thighs. "Gyoku's gonna start wondering where it all goes, anyway. And En was giving me the stink eye, too…"
“One of your servants has to be a decent knitter,” Koumei says with a raise of his eyebrows. “No one could give you the stink eye if they know how good you look with those things on your legs, anyway.” He trails his fingers down his brother’s chest, down his belly then up again.

"One thing at a time," Kouha huffs. "Not sure I trust them quite enough to be making me stockings yet." A shrug, a loosening of a sash, and he lets his robes slink down his shoulders, all while his fingers paw carefully at Koumei's own, sliding a thumb gingerly up the new scar that cuts over his stomach. "At least you wear scars well."

“I should hope I do,” Koumei murmurs. He runs his hands up and down Kouha’s arms, feeling the muscle there in spite of his slight build, that lets him wield such a giant sword at all no matter how briefly. “Given how many of them I have, I mean. I like having one that comes from protecting you.”

"… Don't do it again." A frown tugs at his lips, and Kouha grabs for one of Koumei's hands, mouth pressing to his palm before he lightly nips at a finger. "I'm supposed to protect you, you know. One scar is enough."

Koumei brushes his thumb over Kouha’s cheek, his other hand resting on the kid’s waist, pulling him a bit closer. “Why are you the one who has to protect me? I’m your big brother.”

"Doesn't matter if you're older." Kouha leans down, butting his head into Koumei’s neck, with a long, heavy exhale. "I'm still stronger, and faster… well, you have your moments, but you don't like all of that stuff. So just let me be good at it and make sure no one hurts you again--I mean--ah, you know what I mean."

“I like it when you’re good at that stuff,” Koumei says, petting his brother’s hair happily. “I like watching it. And I like it when you take care of me.” He stretches out, reaching up a hand to tug at Kouha’s waistband. “I just don’t want you to think you have to.”

"How about I want to, then?" It doesn't take much to wriggle out of what's left of his clothes, his lips parting to press a slow, sucking kiss to the arc of Koumei's throat, his eyes lidding when he wriggles back, settling his knees a bit more solidly on either side of his brother's hips. "I like it a lot more than you trying to die on me, too."

This sight alone is worth staying alive for.
Koumei’s lips spread into a slow smile, and he shifts underneath his brother, hands splaying on his thighs. “Good. Me too. You’re...you look so impressive, when you swing your sword around. I like it especially when you’re hitting people with it.”

Kouha smirks, his own hands sliding down Koumei’s chest, thumbs absently brushing down his nipples, fingers splaying over his ribs. "Yeah? Good, because I like hitting people with it in the first place. Must be a perfect match.” It'd be a lie to say Koumei's words don’t go straight to his ego, and it makes him a little less careful in how he touches, his fingers that much more eager as they reach back to grab for his brother's cock. "… You said you like it, watching it slide up here, right?” he murmurs, shifting to guide Koumei's cock between his thighs with a pointed wriggle.

“Yeah,” Koumei breathes. He props his head up, eyes lidding as he watches the slow slide of the head of his cock through Kouha’s thighs. “You look so lewd like that. I like it when you squeeze down around my cock, god, I can’t even breathe when you do that. In a good way,” he hastens to say, grabbing at Kouha’s hands, suddenly afraid that he’ll stop if he thinks Koumei is worse off than he’s pretending to be.

"Relax, I get it," Kouha laughs, giving Koumei’s hands a squeeze nonetheless as he shifts, sighing out a breath as he deliberately presses his thighs tighter together. The sticky drip of precome makes it a slicker slide, and Kouha's own eyes cast down, breath hitching at the sight. "Would be better if I had those stockings right about now," he breathlessly admits. "Need you to just grab and tear them next time. Something about all the holes and runs in them…”

“Usually I’m the one who likes being ruined,” Koumei murmurs, but Kouha’s right. He squeezes, thinking about hooking his thumbs into the tops of those stockings and tearing them up a little, feeling his cock harden further at the thought until it gets sticky and slick between his brother’s thighs. “I’ll make them nice and dirty after that, hmm?”

That's always a nice image, and Kouha shivers hard, his own pulse jumping at the thought. Prior to Koumei nearly dying, that had been a nice evening, and recalling exactly how messy Koumei had made the both of them in that carriage… "You always do--really a pervert, Mei," he breathes, biting his own lip as his fingers slide down, dragging over the slick head of Koumei's cock when it juts up between his thighs. "Oil still in that table?” he mumbles, glancing up and side eyeing the bedside table in question. "Grab it, I want you in me."

“You make me a pervert,” Koumei says. “I only got like this after you got old enough, I was a good boy.” He reaches over for the oil, and suddenly the thought that he’s using the oil to slick his cock to fuck his little brother makes him shudder, so hard he arches into his own touch. “You look so pretty,” he mumbles, reaching up and stroking slick fingers over Kouha’s hole.

It's a rare day that it's Koumei's fingers, and that makes Kouha whine, his back arching as he
wriggles down, huffing out a hot breath through his nose. "You've never been good," he breathlessly teases, his hands sliding up Koumei's chest, nails a light score against his flesh. "Even if you acted well-behaved, you're always thinking things."

“Mmm, not before my baby brother climbed into my lap and started chewing on my neck.” Koumei says with a grin, and when he sees how much Kouha writhes at his touch, he slips a couple inside, stroking slowly up inside of him. “Before that I was very….mmm, boring, I think you’d say.” He’s still boring most of the time. Only Kouha gets to see him truly alive.

"Not boring," Kouha gasps out, eyes fluttering as he eagerly squirms back, nails flexing against Koumei's chest like one big, overstimulated cat. Koumei has long fingers, and it makes his head bow when they wriggle and stroke inside of him just right, a hard shudder raking up his spine. "J-just… lazy… mostly…" he pants, eyes lidding. "Sorry--I'll let you put it in… in just a sec, just feels good--"

"You can come on my fingers, if you want." Koumei curls his fingers, enjoying the buck of Kouha’s hips more than he probably should. He’s always gotten too much pleasure out of things that have nothing to do with his cock, and this is just as good, makes him want nothing more than to watch Kouha fall apart. “I love watching your face. Come all over me, make me nice and messy, we’ve got years to get my cock inside you.”

That's a good promise if Kouha has ever heard one. He sags back with a little moan, muscles bunching and twitching with the deep, precise curl of Koumei's fingers inside of him, and the tremor that rakes up his spine is enough to make his eyes roll back. "Put another one in." It's a bit too whiny to be an order, though Kouha isn't really trying, besides, as he wriggles back onto his brother's hand. "R-really like it… when it feels like there's so much of you in me--keep doing that, and I'll really… make you a mess, Mei--"

Koumei wriggles another finger inside, eyes locked on his brother’s face. Kouha’s facial muscles are so telling even when the rest of him is usually under his control. He watches those pretty pink lips twitch, his nose wrinkle, his cheeks tremble, eyes water, all the tiny little motions that no one who didn’t know him day in and day out would notice. He slides up his fingers as far in as they’ll go, letting a fourth tease around the hole. “You like having lots in you? Maybe when you ride my cock you should make me put a finger in too, and I can see how hard you come all over me, Ha…”

A panting, broken mewl escapes from his throat, and Kouha shudders hard, his eyes squeezing shut as his hips grind back, hands curling, clawing into Koumei's chest. His cock is so hard that he's dripping, every slide and twist of Koumei's fingers making him twitch now, and that's just--"Not fair," Kouha groans, biting down into his lower lip. Just thinking of being that full of his brother is enough to make him ache all the more, twisting heat in his belly into little knots, and it's with a heavy, ragged breath that he spills, coming hard over Koumei's stomach and chest, the spasm and twinge of muscles and nerves enough to make his vision flicker.
Koumei pants, stilling his fingers inside Kouha’s ass, only pulling out once he’s totally sure Kouha’s finished. God, watching his face is as obscene as anything he’s ever done, and he does feel like a pervert, a lecher, taking pleasure from his little brother’s body writhing on top of him.

Slowly, he drags his other hand through the mess on his own stomach and chest, as far up as his neck, sucking his fingers into his mouth. “You probably don’t know this,” he says dreamily, “because you don’t bed other men, but you come a lot. I love feeling it on me.”

"All the better for you, huh?” Kouha pants out, his eyes still fluttering and not entirely focused as he sags forward, barely keeping himself up with a hand pressed to the mattress. "Ahh… Meiii, you're so hard," he groans, a languid arch of his back making sure to drag the curve of his ass along the length of his brother's cock. "I dunno how you stand it…"

Koumei’s eyelids flutter, and he hisses out a slow, contented breath, rocking his hips up against that firm, supple flesh. “I like pain,” he reminds Kouha with a little laugh. “And I like watching you come. Getting you off gets me off.”

That being said, he’s aching hard now, trying to angle his hips to rub up against that sweet little hole, and he clutches his teeth. “Are you gonna tease me more? Or do you want to ride?”

"Nope, no teasing," Kouha gasps, never mind how he still aches from the stretch of Koumei's fingers before. He shivers hard as he forces himself up onto his knees, reaching a hand back to curl around that hard cock, guiding it to his hole and groaning at that first, tense slide down, the stretch of the head of it pressing inside, everything slick and sweet as he sinks down with a breathless, quivering whine. "When you're this riled up… god-" Kouha swallows hard, the last couple of inches until their hips are flush enough to make his vision blur all over again, and he tips his head forward, panting shallowly as he wriggles atop Koumei's cock. "Makes you feel even bigger."

For as long as he sometimes takes to come, Koumei doesn’t really consider himself to have much stamina. Stamina is someone who can fuck for hours and still have energy, and all Koumei can manage is to stay hard, just a toy for Kouha to play with. “You feel tighter,” he breathes, “even though I just loosened you up.”

He’s the only one who gets to see Kouha like this, Koumei knows, and that goes to his cock too, until he’s swollen so hard he sees stars. “You look so pretty, sitting on my cock like that. What are you going to do to me when I get better, huh?”
Koumei does make a good toy, especially like this, when Kouha is less inclined to let him do any of the work at all. He digs his knees into the bed, no matter how his legs shake and tremble, his thighs bunching from the tension and effort it takes to push himself up as he rocks on Koumei's cock, swallowing down a dozen squeaks and far, far too incriminating whines. "String you up to this bed so you can never leave for starters," he pants out. "M-maybe shove you back against the headboard--let you choke on my cock--"

Koumei’s mouth waters at just the thought. “Love choking on your cock,” he gasps, hands fisting in the sheets as Kouha rides him, plays with him, toys with him. “You have the best cock, best come, you--love it when you tie me to the bed.” His vision has lost a few colors, though he doesn’t know if that’s from part of his injury or just how plain good it all is. “You could--torture me all day, and I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to, even if I begged--” He wouldn’t want to. They both know that. He might beg, because it gets both of them off sometimes, and Kouha looks so pretty when he says no.

One hand shoves down into Koumei’s chest, making sure he stays down as he wriggles and squirms his way up and down that long, hard cock, his eyes glazing and cheeks flushing hotter when Kouha slides down so hard, so deep that there’s nothing to stop the spasming ache of muscles that follows. "I bet you'd like it if I came all over your face first--or would you like swallowing it more? You're such a slut, you'd like both ways too much." His chest heaves with his next breath. "Would make you wait… ahh, until I was done with you before I let you come--"

Koumei lets out a noise that’s more a wail than anything, desperate and urgent as he clutches his hands so tightly it feels like he’ll rip himself open all over again. He never feels so thoroughly used, so thoroughly good as when Kouha uses him, bucking up and down on his cock and just taking his pleasure. “Both,” he agrees, on a mindless groan. “All over me, inside me, I love it no matter where, when it’s you--make me wait.” His voice is a sob, cracked and broken, and he can’t even remember the last time he’d come. He’s in the mindset now, and nothing can break it short of an order. “It hurts, it hurts--”

He can feel how hard Koumei is, pulsing and aching inside of him, and Kouha manages a rapid nod, eyes squeezing shut as he sucks in a ragged breath of his own, sliding down all the way, the twinge of having his brother so deep inside of him making him shudder and clench tight. "T-then just--go ahead and come, Mei, fill me up, I wanna feel you--all inside me--"

Koumei had thought that he couldn’t, that somehow he was so hard he couldn’t even come, like when he’s too tired to sleep and too hungry to eat. But at that whispered command from Kouha, his body seizes up, mouth falling open in a silent scream as he comes hard, a few weeks’ worth since the night in the carriage, pulsing hot and hard and long up inside Kouha. “Thank you,” he moans weakly, collapsing down in a boneless puddle of useless limbs. “You--yes, thank you, thank you, so good--"
Ah, god, he's going to be *dripping* for awhile.

The thought rakes a pointed shiver down his spine, and Kouha can't resist the forward flop down onto Koumei's chest, *trying* to be gentle about it, at the very least. "God," he groans, burying his face into Koumei's neck, his hands fistng up through his hair. "You always feel so *good*, Mei. Ahh… gonna be sore, I'm not getting up ever."

Koumei sighs, relaxing into his brother's touch like a whimpering, pathetic thing. He's still not as bad off as sometimes, and he shudders hard, sweat beading on his hairline. "Good. I want you here as long as you can stand me."

"That's gonna be for a really, *really* long time," Kouha mumbles, rubbing his nose into the crook of Koumei's neck. Gingerly, he drags his fingertips over his brother's stomach, just to make sure nothing really opened back up before relaxing with a long sigh atop him. *Definitely* not moving. Not now, not ever.
Chapter 5

It’s a long, long day.

The sun has burned high overhead for what feels like a week, and the little jobs Sinbad likes to do to remind the people they’re all in this together, building houses and working in the fields, is taking a heavier toll than usual in this heat. The ice bath the servants draw him helps, and the tall glass full of ice and citrus helps even better. He stretches out long, toes curling as he stretches on the bed, attempting for the fifth time to stare at a stack of scrolls Ja’far had left behind. The words blur together on the page as if in the effects of the heat, and he heaves a long sigh, wondering if he should finally just give in and ask for a pair of servants to fan him all the time the way they do in some courts.

"Don't you look bored and useless, stupid king."

He'd made far less of a spectacle about entering Sindria this time. Their 'shields' are still a joke, and Judal has to roll his eyes at the thought of them, and how easy it is for him to simply slip through, not even shattering them. The previous time had just been fun.

Honestly, he should be 'home' right now. Kouha had mentioned something about En doing something fun with him, but Judal doubts it. En never has time for anything fun these days, and giving Sinbad a little poke, especially after their last encounter, is far more entertaining.

"I would've thought you'd be planning your war strategies a bit more frantically," Judal sighs, hanging half into the room from the window. "But instead, you're being as lazy as ever."

Sinbad comes alert in a second--past dealings with Judal assure that. He sits up, his fingers at his jewelry, ready to call on a djinn equip if he needs it. “And I thought your keepers wouldn’t let you out of Kou so soon.” He contemplates shoving the papers off the bed, but decides against it. That would only draw Judal to look at them more, and in all honestly, Sinbad’s not even sure the kid can read.

"Oh," Judal grumbles, "I didn't want to leave, initially. At least, not what they dragged me out for. And I'm headed back, besides, I just thought I'd pay you a visit, first."

It takes just a little push off from the sill before he's in the room, all but coiled around Sinbad's neck
and shoulders in mid-air, fingering one hoop of an earring. "For a king, you've got shit taste sometimes. These are *definitely* brass."

Sinbad reaches a hand up, tugging on Judal’s braid. They’re ignoring their last meeting, apparently, which is honestly just fine with him. He tries to grab for Judal, but he’s a slippery, tricky kid, and Sinbad winds up laughing. “I know. They turned my ears green for three weeks.”

"Well," Judal says, amused, contemplative, and certainly not batting an eye as he swats Sinbad's hands away, "maybe, once the Kou Empire comes in and takes your kingdom away and makes you and everyone else their slave, I'll request you *personally* and put some real gold in your ears."

Sinbad’s hand tightens, and the laughter stops. “We’ll see,” he says, and twists, trying to grab for some part of Judal he can get hold of. “Or maybe it’ll be you who turns into a pretty pet.”

Judal is the one that laughs then, and he twists around, dropping himself neatly onto Sinbad's lap. "Is that an offer?” he purrs, a hand sliding up Sinbad's chest before firmly shoving him back. "You know, I already asked you a dozen times to be my king. Changing your mind now, when I've made sure to talk about killing you instead?"

“Not quite.” Sinbad fastens his hands around Judal’s wrists, stroking, looking up into those odd red eyes. “More like promising that you’ll only have pretty chains once all the bastards you work for are dead and you serve no other master.”

The smile that slowly curves Judal's lips is a far from kind one. "Do you know," he breathes, wriggling deeper into Sinbad's lap, "that when you say things like that… your rukh starts getting all fluttery." He wrenches a hand away, plucking a fluttering, winged thing from the air, and it's just a little twitch of magic that brings it to Sinbad's sight as well--frantic and *black*. "And these, especially, start coming out to play."

Sinbad’s breath hitches, and he smacks the thing out of Judal’s hand, not wanting to see it. Bad enough he knows they’re there, buzzing around his soul like the few white ones he wants to hold onto, and he takes a deep breath, trying to calm it down. “You always bring out the worst in me, you know.”

Judal's lips purse into a deep pout. "Really rude. Why does it have to be the *worst*? All of mine are black, and I'll have you know I'm *very* happy." Casually, he slides a hand up, wrapping his fingers through the tail of Sinbad's hair, pulling it over his shoulder. "It's more powerful, you know. Harder to control, but… ahh, the most powerful things always are," he murmurs, and a swift *yank* on Sinbad's hair follows. "I could teach you. Al-Sarmen still wants you, after all, even if you won't be
my king."

“I’m not afraid of the darkness.”

He’s afraid, a bit, of what the darkness will do to him, do to Sindria if he doesn’t stop it, but that’s not the same thing. He leans his head back into the yank, eyes slitting. “I’d rather sink my country into the sea than give it to your masters,” he purrs, a slow grin on his face.

A tilt of his head, and Judal shrugs, sighing as he releases Sinbad's hair. "Ah, well. That's fine."

He's fast when he wants to be. Strong enough, too, especially when it comes to just flipping someone over, and Sinbad's face hits the mattress easily enough. "They'll just take it, then," Judal gleefully purrs, a knee digging into Sinbad's lower back as he perches atop him, rather pleased with his conquest. "And I'll make sure they aren't nice about it. Or to you, for that matter," he sighs, his fingers sliding up through Sinbad's hair again, yanking hard. "You make nice faces when you're hurting, too…"

Sinbad goes still, attempts to wriggle free, but Judal’s got him well and truly pinned, and to try and throw him off would turn into a full-out battle. In his present state, hot and tired and alone, fighting a Magi doesn’t sound like the greatest prospect he has, not when Judal seems so content to bat him around like a fuzzy mouse toy. “You’re a sadist,” he mutters, hissing at the hold in his hair. “You get way too much pleasure from having me like this.”

"Yeah," Judal admits on a breath, grinning as he yanks again on the tail of Sinbad's hair, rather liking the pained, hissing noise that escape his throat. It's sort of satisfying to cause him just a bit of pain, especially when he thinks about all the times he's been rejected. "And you're a masochist. You're not exactly trying to make me stop," he snidely points out, wriggling back slightly, sighing out a breath as he lets the hard line of his cock drag against Sinbad's ass. "Just think, this is what you get for not letting me choose you. Good thing you look decent enough facedown."

"Shit."

Sinbad tries again to twist his way out of Judal’s hold, but he’s pinned a lot more securely than he’d even thought, enough that he only manages to strain his shoulder, and it does nothing about the hold on his hair. “You’re--ah, let me go, you bastard.” Already he’s calculating his chances, and with a grumbling, annoyed growl, comes to the conclusion that he’s almost certainly going to be better off getting over this by accepting it. He struggles again, and ugh, at least maybe this will get Judal out of Sindria without killing anyone else.
He bows his head, taking in a deep, shuddering breath. “How long have you wanted to do this, anyway?”

Judal's eyes narrow. "I haven't thought about it too much, honestly."

Another yank twists and wraps Sinbad's hair around his arm, letting him pull with enough force to yank the king's head back, the angle far too sharp to be comfortable. "I wanted to come and play, you know," he breathes hot into Sinbad's ear before biting down, the taste of copper blooming on his tongue and making his eyes flutter. "Your rukh, black or white, is always so inviting. But I guess this is another way to play after all, isn't it? Ah, look, you're so stressed," Judal murmurs, his other hand tracing along one cheekbone as he leans forward. "That's sort of conflicting. I bet you're hard, too."

Sinbad lets out a low hissing noise, and he wriggles down, this time a lot less because he’s trying to get away, and a lot more because the feelings are ricocheting through his body, making him twist and squirm. “I’m—I’ve got a man sitting—a magi sitting on my hips,” he grunts, even though he hurts, he’s pressed down hard, and if Judal even snaked a hand slightly past him he’d feel how hard it makes him. “Stressed,” he admits. “Is this what you came here for?”

"Ah, don't say that like I'm heavy, I know I'm not." It's petulant, almost pouty, but Judal slides back a bit nonetheless, eyes lidding as a knee shoves Sinbad's legs apart, making it easier to slide between them. "And yeah… I like it when you're stressed. Looks good on you," he distractedly replies, far more interested in how it feels to grind up against Sinbad's ass, his own cock already aching through thin fabric. "Lift your hips up," he murmurs, giving Sinbad's hair another little yank to solidify the order.

It’s hard to tell whether doing what Judal says will be better, or worse. He’s so hard to read, so capricious, that it’s hard to tell if Judal wants him to lay down and take it or fight.

What the hell, if this is happening, he might as well enjoy it until he can get the upper hand.

His back arches slowly, and he lifts his hips up, already aching, already hoping Judal can feel how much he wants to feel like this, pinned down and grabbed at by someone who can. “Are you stressed, Judal? Are you gonna take it out on me?”

"Ahhh, shut up, stupid king."
The hold on Sinbad's hair changes, sliding up closer to his scalp to shove his face down into the mattress. "This isn't about me," Judal breathlessly replies, eyes briefly shutting as he lets his hips rut forward, swallowing back a low groan as he hastily shoves his own clothing down, letting just his cock slide against the curve of Sinbad's ass. "Consider this training," he adds with a smirk, shoving at Sinbad's robes in kind, hiking the mess of layers up to his lower back. "I told you, the second the Kou Empire marches in here… though, honestly," he breaks off with a hitch of breath, dragging his nails over bared flesh, scoring into tanned skin, "seems like you already are pretty damn good at this lying down and taking it thing."

Sinbad closes his eyes, imagining the end of that war, how it can end in peace and freedom and all of his subjects being able to live in the sun forever. Judal doesn’t want to hear that, he wants to think about all the people who will die, all the blood and the screaming and the death. Judal doesn’t want to think of an end where the most people survive and thrive, he wants to think about ruling, and conquering, and subjecting people to his whims.

At least just now, the only person who’s under Judal’s thumb is someone who doesn’t exactly mind it.

“You’re so hard.” The words are a distracted mutter into the pillow, a little slurred as Sinbad cants his hips back, rubbing against him. “I can’t look that good on my belly.”

Judal's breath catches hard at that, and his cock slides forward, slick from his own precome, up the cleft of Sinbad's ass. "Like you were made to be there, more like," he mutters, and he releases Sinbad's hair for the moment, far more in favor of grabbing at the king's hips, hauling him back and biting at his own lip when the head of his cock drags over his hole. "Definitely… thinking you were the one made to be a pet."

Sinbad’s face presses into the silk of the pillow, and he makes a last, not-entirely-committed attempt to escape, a low noise leaving his throat when Judal’s hold just tightens. Judal’s cock is slick already, and since Sinbad knows he’s hardly in a kind enough mood to use oil, he can’t help but be glad of it. “Just—” Ah, god, he hasn’t done this for years, except when he’s really drunk. He squirms, knees parting on the bed, trying to remind himself not to beg, no matter how nice it feels to have Judal rubbing up against him.

Then he just gives up, shoulders relaxing. “Just put it in already,” he groans.

God, if that isn’t satisfying.

It makes him even harder, listening to Sinbad whine for it, accept it and squirm underneath him.
because he *knows* he can't do anything about it. The thrill that runs down his spine makes his chest heave from the hard breath that escapes, and Judal barely thinks to spits on his own hand, dragging it down the hard, dripping length of his cock.

He's *far* from gentle when he's grabbing, clawing at Sinbad's hips, pulling him back as he shoves forward, hissing at that first tense, aching slide inside. Judal lurches forward, shoved into the hilt with one, rough thrust, panting hot against the back of Sinbad's neck, grabbing for his hair against to use it as a leash, all the better to haul him back onto his cock. "*Definitely* made for it," Judal groans, his eyes lidding as he grinds his hips in, glancing down to see the stretch of Sinbad's body around his cock. "You'll make someone--ahh… *god*--a *good* slave, one of these days."

Sinbad’s breath catches, ripped from his lungs as he bites down hard on the pillow, legs spreading further in an attempt to lessen that *stretch* a little, to make it a little easier to take when it’s not nearly slick enough, but it hardly works. He trembles, muscles bunching as he clenches down involuntarily, groaning when that just makes Judal feel *bigger* inside him.

Unbidden, unwanted, the image, the idea of what Judal’s saying comes to him, the idea of being Judal’s conquered slave, of being chained down and *used* like this every night. His cock is hard and dripping against his thigh, back arched tight as he shoves down on Judal’s cock, sweat beading between his shoulderblades.

His lips part, and he mutters quietly, not sure if he even wants Judal to hear him, "*Harder.*"

"Huh? What was that, *Your Majesty*?" It's a mocking croon in Sinbad's ear, especially when Judal eagerly obliges him all the same, shoving in deeper, *harder* with his next thrusts, skin slapping roughly together as he slides his knees up further for more leverage. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you *like* the idea--" Judal gasps out, eyes rolling back when Sinbad squeezes so tightly around him that he can barely *breathe*. "Of-*fuck*… of being my slave. So much for the *proud* King of Sindria. God, am I this tight when you're fucking me?" he breathlessly laughs, a swift, hard pull on Sinbad's hair yanking him firmly back onto Judal's cock as he leans back, just a bit, just to get a better *look*. "M-maybe I should start *calling* you 'slave', see how fast you come then."

This isn’t fair.

Sinbad can’t remember ever getting off this hard to being *used*, not even years ago when he’d been far, far more likely to indulge in this kind of thing, especially once he’d had plenty of wine in a strange city. Then, it had just been fun, an eager grabbing of hands and mouths, and this is far more intense. This is like becoming one with fire, being consumed with every breath, spiraling into *wanting* with every movement. He can imagine the golden cuffs on his wrists, chaining him to a bed or a cold floor on his knees, and just now he wants to know how it would feel if there were someone in his mouth too while Judal thrust hard into him, feeling the burn and stretch of being stuffed so full.
He groans, biting the pillow again, and it *hurts* that there’s no one touching his cock, that he lurches down to try and rub against the bed and he *can’t* when he’s so, so hard. *Please*, he thinks, not wanting to know what Judal would do if he’d said it aloud. *Please, please...*

Judal's *curious*. He can't help but be, not when Sinbad's writhing on his cock like a bitch in heat, making noises that he's *trying* to stifle, and so he straightens up a bit, sliding one hand around and underneath, and his breath escapes that much faster at feeling how *hard* Sinbad really is. "So you *do* like this a lot more than you wanna let me know," he laughs, fingers squeezing around the other man's cock in a rough stroke before sliding away. "Not just a slave. A *slutty* one at that. Kouen," he adds with a grunt, shoving his cock in *hard*, "would like to *watch* someone like you get this messed up."

It's not enough to come inside him, Judal hazily thinks, a little too drunk on sex and *control* to process beyond *want want want*, and he pulls out with a shudder, his hand sliding over his own cock only once, twice more before he spills, tipping his head back and swallowing back a deep groan as he comes over Sinbad's ass, over his thighs, marking him up as much as he can.

The single rough stroke to his cock is enough to send Sinbad over the edge, and he lets out a cry that doesn’t even sound like his own voice, rutting down hard as he spills over the sheets and his own thighs, a second later feeling Judal come *on* him, not even giving him the satisfaction of feeling it inside, filling him deep, making him drip for hours like a filthy used--

Sinbad shudders, swallowing hard and trying to catch his breath, trying to remind himself that he’s *not* a slave, not a dancing whore, but the king of a country and no man’s plaything.

As filthy and empty as he feels, wishing Judal were still in him, it’s more difficult than he wants it to be.

He sags down to the bed, groaning, looking weakly up over his shoulder.

Judal's eyes are dark, lidded as he strokes an absent hand up Sinbad's spine, tugging on the ends of his hair with a little, hitching sigh. "I *could* just take you back to Kou with me right now," he murmurs, his head tilting to the side. "Almost seems like you'd agree to that more than you'd *ever* agree to being my king."

“I make a bad captive.” Sinbad butts his head against Judal’s hand, sighing. “But I don’t mind it so much when you stop by like this. Or if you stayed.”
"The fact you're a bad captive makes it fun." Judal sighs, flopping tiredly to the side, annoyance furrowing his brow. "I just declared war on you and your country, dumbass. Be more… afraid, or something." Never mind that the invitations really do make me wanna stay.

“When you show up with an army, I'll fight them. That's what war is,” Sinbad says, and stretches out, throwing an arm over Judal’s stomach. “Why can’t we have fun until then? I prefer rolling around like this to quaking in my boots.”

"… If you wanted that, you'd have let me choose you awhile ago." The Magi snorts, smacking at Sinbad's arm no matter how he doesn't quite shove it away. "Whatever. I told you I'd make you mine. Doesn't matter how I do it, you just wait."

“And I’ve told you, as soon as it’s just you and not your friends, I’ll be happy to choose you.” Sinbad ignores the slap, tightening his arm. “Will you stay the night? Or fly back to Kouen’s lap?”

"Servants. They're my servants," Judal dully corrects, his head flopping back. "What's with you? You're really dense today. Maybe I shouldn't put it in you again, makes you weird."

“So weird I see servants as people that do your bidding, and masters as people that tell you what to do.” Sinbad shrugs. “If you hated it, next time I’ll get you onto your back. You always like that.”

"… Kouen's expecting me." Judal shoves Sinbad's arm away once and for all, throwing his legs over the side of the bed. "It's fucking hot here. Like I'd want to spend the night, anyway."

“Can’t argue with that.” Sinbad’s already sticky, and he reaches for his drink, taking a long, sweet sip of the cold stuff. “Go help Kouen get his armies ready. I’ll be disappointed if they don’t turn out to be a challenge.”

Judal sneers at that, and it takes but a second, a flick of his wand before Sinbad's arms are wrenched above his head, solidly pinned with ice frozen tightly around them. "He doesn't need an army," he breathes, leaning in close, their noses brushing. "He has me. That should be more than enough challenge, shouldn't it?" Judal smiles as he slides away, hopping off of the bed. "At least you should be a little cooler now, hmm?"

Damn, Sinbad had been hoping he’d get through this visit without any frostbite whatsoever. His jaw clenches, teeth bared as he struggles against the hold, but not very hard. “Much cooler,” he growls. “And make sure you don’t get too tired before the first battle. I have some things I want you to see.”
"You always say that, but you never show me very much," Judal sighs, spinning his wand in his hand before tucking it away again as he turns away. "I'm starting to wonder why I ever wanted you after all. Well, anyway," he lightly hums, leaping up into the windowsill. "Have a nice evening, Sinbad! I'll make sure Kouen knows exactly how much you like being fucked like a dog!"

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Judal is late.

Judal is a lot more late than usual, given that he’d had lunch with the Magi, and expected him for dinner.

Six days ago.

Kouen doesn’t deal with disobedience kindly, nor does he particularly enjoy indulging laziness. He’s done both, indulged and been kind to Judal even through his faults, for a very long time. And look where that has gotten me, he thinks sourly, staring down at his maps with the little figures on them.

Judal’s figure is off the board, a mystery for him, nothing he can count on, and even when he’d bowed to the inevitable and asked Al-Sarmen for help locating him, all they could tell him was that Judal was alive, and masking his trail. Useless, and Kouen is beginning to doubt once again that the Magi will ever be as useful as Al-Sarmen had promised his father those long years ago.

He’d thought this would be it. They’re at war now, and Judal’s eyes had lit up at that like they hadn’t since he was a little child and he’d been entertained, and it was Kouen who brought him that, declared war on three countries, is going to win them. He’d thought this would be it, and surely, surely Judal would see that there was no better man to be king of all the world, and would finally stop dithering with that idiot down south and choose a proper king, one who was born to the life, and they could rule the Empire together as they’d planned since childhood.

Instead, Judal had disappeared, yet again. The piece is off the board, nothing he can count on moving.

Hakuei’s piece is far from Kou, now, and getting farther every day. Kouen’s chest tightens as he sets it on the board, but there was no helping it. Even a week into what Hakuei had sworn was a pregnancy, he’d seen Gyokuen’s eyes glittering in her direction. No matter how difficult it had been
to watch her ride away at the front of a South-bound army, it’s worth it, if she and the child he’d never thought he’d father are safe.

The rest of the pieces are in disarray. Kouha, useful when the time comes. Koumei, useful in a certain way, a certain place. Hakuryuu, at least not making too much trouble at this particular second. Kougyoku, at least seems to be confining herself to hesitant whining. Everyone else will do as they’re bid, but family is the part that always throws a wrench into the works. His father had taught him that, long ago.

It’s probably been too long since he’s left this room, really.

The one thing about Kouen’s study is that there aren’t really any windows.

It makes sneaking inside a little more difficult, though Judal does know of the back ways well enough, especially the ways Hakuei usually used. Still, it’s not the same as tumbling in through a window and flopping himself into Kouen’s lap that way, especially after a long, long flight back, and he’s tired besides--hardly interested in walking and far more entranced with the idea of sleeping and eating.

Sleeping first, though.

His yawn is his first greeting as he stumbles further in, takes one look at Kouen at his desk and in that chair and he always has looked like something worth making a nest out of what with all those robes, and so it takes about two seconds before he climbs up into Kouen’s lap, legs thrown over one side of the chair as he flops down.

It’s startling, how natural it still feels.

Kouen remembers, suddenly, how Judal used to do this, used to climb up onto his lap for the smallest reason or no reason at all, and for once wouldn’t interrupt his plans when he was so busy working on something for Father, would just climb up (it was a lot farther for the Magi’s chubby little arms then, and he hadn’t learned to float) and flop down on top of him. It had felt natural, easy, and even if Judal is just a few inches shorter than him now and has a decent amount of muscle, it still feels oddly the same.

Kouen doesn’t even start when Judal curls up on his lap, just drops his free hand to the Magi’s hair, stroking slowly as the other one moves down a sheet of troop reports. There’s time to talk about how
late Judal is when he wakes up, after all.

"Got sidetracked," is the sleepy murmur to follow, and Judal is infinitely pleased with his choice of a resting place when he starts being petted. His head butts against Kouen’s hand. "Didn't miss anything, though, did I?"

“Six days’ worth,” Kouen says in a low, even voice. He’s not even really angry, but he doesn’t put Judal’s piece back on the board either, even though he does start scratching gently behind one ear. “I was hoping to send you with the largest command to blow up a few cities, but they left without you.”

"… Oh." That’s disappointing, Judal frowns, his eyes lidding. "Didn't think you'd be sending one out any time soon--it's been so boring here. But hey, I went and scared Sinbad again!"

“Hakuei went to Balbadd with the main army,” Kouen says quietly. He misses her already; he could use that calming force right now, and knows he’ll want it more after a few more days without her. Still, maybe she’s holding over; usually he’d snap and growl that he doesn’t fucking care if Sinbad is scared, and besides he rather doubts that Judal has the necessary capacity to pull it off in any case.

Maybe it’s Hakuei’s influence, or maybe he’s just too busy wishing she were home to focus on being upset.

"Oh." Judal pauses, thinking. It’s not often Kouen is this subdued nowadays--not often he doesn’t get annoyed with having Judal flop into his lap, either, especially when he's late--so he should probably try and do something to make him happy. "… I can go check on her, if you want?" It's probably a shitty idea, but well… "I mean, not right now. When she gets there and gets settled and stuff." He lifts a hand, idly tugging on a tie of Kouen's robes. "So you stop making those weird worried faces."

Kouen has to smile at that. It is something of a relief, knowing that Judal has the ability to move so far so fast, that he can go check on Hakuei, that he was available to fly to the Winter Palace and save Mei. “I never thanked you properly,” he murmurs, nuzzling down to butt his forehead gently against Judal’s, “for saving my brother’s life either. How about a feast just for the two of us, in my rooms, like we used to?”

So apparently, that was the right thing to say. Judal breathes a sigh of relief, grinning as he lurches up nudge his nose against Kouen's. "Seriously? I haaate having to eat alone while I'm here, I was afraid I'd have to go hide in the kitchens again to get a decent meal."
“Not at all.” Because he’s feeling quite fond and there’s no one around (and he’s a little lonely), Kouen even leans down to give Judal’s nose a kiss before ringing the bellpull for a servant. “A feast,” he says easily, tugging on Judal’s hair, “in my chambers. In a quarter of an hour’s time, you’re to be prepared to feed a Magi and a prince, and show how the kitchen wants to impress us both.”

The servant bows and scurries out, and Kouen laughs. “I can’t wait to see what they come up with. I hope you’re really hungry.”

"Starving, more like," Judal groans, twisting upright a bit more to rub his cheek against Kouen’s shoulder. "All that flying… really tiresome. I wish I hadn't now, you're a lot more fun to sit around with after all."

Maybe, if this night goes well, he’ll put Judal’s piece back on the board after all. “I know, it’s fine, I’ve been neglecting you. Did you kill anyone important in Sindria?”

"N…o…" Judal reluctantly admits. "But I froze Sinbad to a bed and left him?"

Kouen waves a hand. “All in due course. It’ll be more fun to kill them on the battlefield anyway, especially with you by my side. If you’ll still fight with me?” Always good to ask, with Judal, lest he be reminded forcefully that the Magi is technically a free agent still.

"Of course I will! I'm glad you didn't send me with that other army, I wanna go with yours," Judal sighs, sitting up enough now to loop his arms around Kouen's neck as he wriggles close. "Hey, did you know Sinbad likes being fucked like a dog? Some king he is."

Kouen’s mind is on troop movements, and how much he can comfortably expedite now that he has Judal back on his side, and it takes him a second to catch up. “He what?”

Judal grins, still infinitely amused. "Yeah. On his hands and knees, just like a dog. I didn't think he'd let me, but he was a lot more eager than I ever expected."

“Oh, really?” Kouen’s mind does a sharp left turn, and it’s not nearly as hard as he might pretend to imagine Sinbad on his hands and knees with someone inside him. And this time in his imagination, the self-made king is enjoying it. Yes, that makes it much more demeaning, he’s surprised he hasn’t thought of it before, and his eyes light up. “What did you do to him? Tell me.”
Sometimes, Kouen really *can* be fun, and now is definitely one of those times. "He's *easy*, so I didn't have to do much," Judal sighs, tugging idly at a strand of Kouen's hair. "But he looks so *good* with his face shoved down into the bed. I told him to lift his hips up like a good whore, and he did it, just begging me to fuck him. Best part--he kept acting like he'd want more, especially when I told him he'd make a good slave, chained to my bed," he breathes. "Maybe we could play with him together, sometime."

Kouen can picture it all, and *easily*. Did Sinbad truly like it, or was he putting on a show? Kouen’s not sure which he’d prefer, they’re both deliciously obscene. “I wonder if he does it all the time. Did he feel loose like a whore, or tight like a virgin?” he murmurs, tiptoing a pair of fingers up Judal’s spine. “Did you make him scream?”

Judal *purrs*, all too eager to squirm his way closer, to properly straddle Kouen's lap now that he's all but been handed an invitation. "He was trying not to--what a slut, he begged for me to do it *harder,*" he sighs, lacing his arms around Kouen's neck. "But he was as tight as a virgin. I *know* he doesn't do it often, maybe he doesn't want anyone to know."

Kouen leans in to nibble at Judal’s neck, mind full of speculation, of the idea of a beaten, defeated Sinbad kneeling at his feet, maybe chained there, and begging to be fucked harder. “Did you leave marks on him, so everyone would know what a whore he is?”

"Mnhm, scratches and bites *and,*" Judal says with a laugh as he tilts his head to the side, eagerly sliding his hands back through Kouen's hair to pull his mouth to another spot on his throat, "remember how I said I left him frozen to the bed? I came *on him,* really marked him as a whore and left him like that, and I *know* he liked it."

Kouen hardens at that mental image, grinding up against Judal with a dark glee in his eyes. “Oh, *perfect.* Maybe his guards will find him, and have some fun themselves before helping him down. Did he look like he could take more, when you left him?”

"Oh," Judal sighs out, his eyes fluttering as his legs spread, all the better to rut down against the hard line of Kouen's cock, "*definitely.* I wanna see him… with your cock stuffing him full, maybe with me in his mouth… or let me put it in him, too," he gasps, cock twitching at the thought, nails dragging harder through Kouen's hair, "at the same time."

“I bet he could take that,” Kouen groans, reaching down to drag his palm over Judal’s hardening cock. “He’s so tight though, you think we’d make it? Or would we just rip him apart?” The idea of that has merit too, and Kouen ruts up against Judal’s ass, eyes narrowed to slits.
It's a rare day that Kouen actually *touches him*, and that makes Judal's voice break on a whine, his legs splaying further apart as he wriggles forward, eagerly rubbing into Kouen's hand. "He's... way too good at taking cock, for that to happen," he pants, arching his back to twist and squirm against the line of Kouen's cock. "Y-you're so big though, he'd already be squirming--"

"Like a worm on a hook," Kouen murmurs, mental images so strong he can’t help but rut up again, and Judal has a nice enough ass that he can almost pretend he’s a woman. "Does he scream, or does he whimper? Does he sound like a captured beast, or a captured woman? Ah, I should get a servant in here, make you show me what you did to him."

"Or you could do it to me," Judal breathes, his mouth fastening on the lobe of Kouen's ear, teeth tugging, pulling. "I'll try to act a little bit unwilling, if you want, just like he was--no promises though, you have such a nice cock, En," he murmurs, pawing at Kouen's robes again.

"You’re not worried I’ll get carried away?" He has, before, when Judal wanted to play a game. Judal had sulked after, and Kouen hadn’t invited him back to bed for a year. Now, he seems eager enough, and Kouen lets the Magi open his robes, fisting a hand in his hair and yanking his face down. "Did he suck your cock? Get on his knees and drool all over you?"

*Eager* is an understatement, what with how quickly Judal slides down to the floor, his knees hitting it roughly as he's yanked forward, lips catching against the tip of Kouen's cock. "No, but I bet he would," he breathlessly huffs, breath hot as his tongue swipes messily over the tip of the dripping head. Kouen never likes being toyed with so much as he just likes having his cock shoved down someone's throat, and right then, Judal is happy to oblige, his hands splaying over the man's thighs as he drops his head down, swallowing him down with a fast, whining breath through his nose, making sure to gag just a little--all the better to make his eyes tear up, his kohl smear as Judal glances up through his lashes, cheeks flushed and lips slick, swollen, stretched wide around every inch of him.

Ah, Judal knows how to please him. Kouen tightens his fist, yanking Judal down to swallow him to the root, feeling the slick squeeze of his throat and using him hard and fast, thrusting in deep every time to feel that wet hot constriction around his cock. "You look like a whore," he grunts, and shove Judal’s hands off his thighs, not giving him any leverage at all, making it impossible for him to resist being yanked around by Kouen’s will. "You like it when a real man, a real king, shoves you down and uses you, don’t you?"

Judal would nod, but there's little hope for that, not when Kouen is shoved so far down his throat that it's hard to *breathe*. His eyes flutter helplessly, a mindless, muffled sound that *might* have been a mewl of assent escaping as he lends himself to Kouen's pulls and thrusts, choking and gagging *hard-on purpose*--when Kouen shoves him down until his nose rubs into his belly.

It's impossible not to snake a hand down between his own legs, huffing out hot, ragged breaths
through his nose as Kouen fucks his mouth, uses him so thoroughly. His own cock aches, and in his grasp, it throbs, making Judal spread his legs farther apart on the floor as he grinds into his hand, his own messy, sloppy, eager sucking noises almost not making it to his own ears over the rapid thudding of his pulse.

For a second, it isn’t Judal on his knees that Kouen sees, but Sinbad, High King of the Seven Seas, sucking sloppily, gagging on his cock like a captured wench. “You’d look lovely in chains,” he breathes, eyes dark and full of promise. “And I would listen to you scream but there would be no hope, no saving you.” It’s a dark, eager pleasure that he takes, and pulls out until just the tip of his cock is in Judal’s mouth before he comes, spilling across his tongue, then finishing on his face in a broad white streak. “And now,” he pants, “you look every inch the whore you are.”

His first swallow is a sloppy one, and Judal lifts a hand to immediately wipe at his chin, swiping at what he misses and quickly sucking those fingers into his mouth with a ragged, broken little groan. His eyes squeeze shut, the slick, hot mess dripping over his face more than enough to make his hips jerk into his other hand, the squeeze of his fingers just an added push towards the edge as he comes with a whimper, panting as his head lolls forward to rest against Kouen’s thigh, shivering and nuzzling at him. "Really like being your whore," he pants out, and he's not sure if he's playing the game anymore or being honest. "Put me in chains, shove me down on your cock, let me be your slave--"

“It’s what you’re made for,” Kouen says softly, and only barely restrains himself from letting his hand fly, letting it crack across Judal’s face. At the last second he pulls back, remembers that he’s not Sinbad, this isn’t real, this is the Magi he’s supposed to cherish so much. He fists his hand too hard in Judal’s hair instead, grabbing him and throwing him down over the desk, dragging a hand up between his legs to come away wet. “You found pleasure in having my cock stuffed down your throat? Filthy slut. I should punish you for that.”

Judal writhes, his legs splaying wide, and for once, he likes the too-rough pull on his hair, the burn along his scalp that leaves him wincing and arching all at once, straining against the hold. "C-can’t help it," he groans, his eyes squeezing shut as tears prickle into his eyes. "You should… should punish me--" Judal licks at his lips. "I've been a really bad girl--"

Kouen blinks. He’s not even quite sure what game they’re playing anymore, but it makes him hard all the same. Judal does that sometimes, but the wild ride is always worth it, in the end. “Filthy slut,” he repeats, in a sharp whisper, and his hand cracks down against Judal’s ass, leaving a bright red handprint. “You’d like it if I let all my soldiers have you, wouldn’t you? Until you were swollen to bursting with their seed and mine?”

The yelp that pulls from his throat breaks into a sobbing, keening whine, and Judal arches his back, trembling from the sting of Kouen’s hand, the idea of being used and dripping and aching, someone in his mouth and his ass and ahh, it’s probably bad that he can imagine it being both Sinbad and
Kouen so clearly--"Y-yes, god, yes," he groans, lurching forward over the desk to bury his face into his arms. "Use me, I wanna feel you in me, no one fucks me like you do--"

Kouen sends his hand down hard at that, a snarl on his face from wanting to ask if that’s true, then why do you sneak out to fly to Sindria all the time to have another man’s cock inside you, slut? “You want me?” He growls, another slap, and another, until he has to pull back and stop himself lest he really hurt the Magi. “Where?”

The tears are real now, streaking down his face as Judal whines and whimpers, biting his lip to keep from shrieking with the slap of Kouen's hand that borders just a bit too rough. His skin throbs, aches in a way that borders too painful, but that's always the risk he runs when he plays like this with Kouen, pushes one too many buttons.

In a way, he still sort of likes it.

I deserve it, I was late and disobeyed and so I deserve it, a bleary, hazy part of his mind reminds him, and Judal bows his head with a ragged, unsteady little exhale. "I-in me. Want you fucking my ass, just--just use me, I like being your toy--"

Kouen slaps down again, unable to help himself. “Wrong answer, slut,” he growls, hard now at the shrieks as much as he is at the feel of Judal’s ass under his hand. “You want me in where? What a slutty girl you are.” He kicks Judal’s legs apart, seeing someone else already, then banishing the notion, because he’d never take Hakuei so roughly, never treat her like he’s going to treat this whore. He reaches around, tugging roughly on a nipple, pinching and pulling too hard, liking the way Judal squirms and shrieks. “Beg me, you whore.”

A part of Judal's mind effectively clicks off, glazing over until the pinches and slaps that would normally make him complain only feel good, only make his cock harder as he squirms back desperately, each breath making his chest heave from the effort. "W-want you in me--please, please, please--" He's whimpering, mostly, his eyes fluttering as he twists and squirms, his toes curling as he arches up onto them, fingers scrabbling against Kouen's desk. "Fuck me, please, Daddy, need your big cock in me, n-need you to fuck me and show me my place--"

Kouen’s hands come up under Judal’s knees, hauling him off the ground so he has no leverage whatsoever, dangling him in midair so he has no choice, and as exhausted and underfed as he probably is, he doubts Judal has enough magoi even to float right now. He rubs the head of his cock against that sweet little hole, and shoves in far too hard, slick with Judal’s spit and his own seed from earlier, slamming in to the hilt in one brutal thrust. “Scream for me, little girl,” he growls. “Show me your Daddy is teaching you right.”
Judal thinks he screams. Or maybe it gets caught up in his throat as his chest heaves with a sob, his hands clawing, clinging to the desk as best he can as he's stuffed so full, so fast that his eyes roll back and his mouth falls open, incapable of anything but feeling every inch of Kouen shoved inside of him for a few moments. It hurts, aches, too tight, not slick enough, too much, and his legs shake and tremble, his breath ragged from the effort, but he weakly squirms back all the same, muscles twitching, squeezing so tight that his vision blurs all over again. "Pleeease--" It's a heady, helpless mewl, and Judal shakes again with the next sob that pulls from his throat. "J-just--just fuck me, Daddy, I need it--"

Kouen bites an ear, tasting blood and only fucking Judal harder because of it. “I bet,” he pants, “a filthy slut like you can come without me touching her, can’t you? Just because you like the feeling of my cock fucking you so hard?"

He doesn’t often let himself let go, except with slaves and women that don’t matter. It’s too tempting to keep going, and it takes a tremendous act of will not to let his hand curl around Judal’s neck, squeezing just enough to feel him thrash harder. Instead, he slams in harder, hoping the Magi bleeds, making sure of it with his teeth. “Show me how bad you want me to breed you--"

Now that just isn't fair.

That shouldn't go straight to his cock, shouldn't make him moan and thrash like he really is just an animal to be marked up and bred. It does all the same, makes him pant and whine and try so hard to hump back onto Kouen's cock, the twinge of having him so deeply inside, using him so roughly only making him harder. Only me, I'm the only one that's good at having him like this, the only one that likes it and keeps coming back for more--

Kouen's right, too--he doesn't need a single touch to his cock, no matter how Judal tries to rut down against the desk to no avail, sobbing and panting as he comes hard, melting from the exhaustion that seems to follow so quickly on its heels. Just like that, everything is so suddenly, abruptly hypersensitive, and every twitch and rock of Kouen's hips makes Judal gasp, makes him squirm all the more, leaving him to shudder at how utterly used he feels.

Kouen presses a kiss to Judal’s ear. “Perfect. I knew you were nothing but a slutty bitch on all fours.”

He grabs Judal’s hair, shoving his head down to the desk and ignoring everything but his own pleasure, slamming in hard and rough, letting Judal dangle uselessly from the edge of the desk and hearing his little gasps and whimpers, only taking him harder for it. “And I’ll breed you too,” he groans, snapping in deeper. “So you can walk around all--swollen and--”
The thought is too much, and he slams deep inside as he comes, filling him as much as he can, utterly driven over by the idea of Judal carrying his seed even when he shouldn’t be.

Judal’s brow furrows into a wince--god, that stings--and no matter how he’d normally be content to flop around, still so full after being fucked, he’s a little too achy, a little too sore, wanting a hot bath or at least a warm pair of arms to snuggle up into after the fact. "R…really good," he mumbles all the same, and he's not lying. His vision is still crossing, just a bit. "You're… gonna need to carry me, though, to your room. I think."

Kouen pulls out slowly, a little chagrined at the sight in front of him, but at least Judal isn’t complaining. That warms his heart a little, and he carefully wraps Judal in one of his own robes before scooping him up into his arms. “Too sleepy to eat?” he rumbles, not caring who sees them in the halls at this time of night. “I can have everything reheated in the morning, don’t worry.”

Judal flops his head back, infinitely pleased that he's actually getting carted around like he'd requested. "Noo, still need food," he sighs, wriggling his toes as the shivers twitching up his spine start restoring feeling there. He supposes that's how he knows it's good, if he's numb in odd places. "Hornier I am, the hungrier I am. Can I steal your bath, too?" Doubtful, that Kouen's going to want him in his bed when he's filthy, anyway.

“Of course, I’m not letting you into my bed like that,” Kouen says with a grin, shouldering open the door to his room with a touch of his magoi to the locks, letting them recognize him. There’s already a feast laid out on the table, and he stretches out on his bed, setting Judal down gently. “Food will be here when you’re done.”

Never, ever has Judal bathed so quickly.

He still stings in odd places, aches in even odder ones, but he scrubs himself clean in record time all the same, wringing out his hair and using a quick flash of magic to leave it mostly dry before he pulls the mass of it over his shoulder, bunching and tying it up into a heavy, loose knot of a bun rather than braid it as he normally would. "The perks of being back home," Judal sighs as he drifts back into the room, still wrapped up the clean robe Kouen had draped about him, and he plops himself down gently. "So all things considered… seems like you're in a good mood," he casually points out, eyes lidded as they glow, scanning the room for listening spells and finding none. "That have to do with Hakuei? Or do I just look especially pretty today?"

“You look lovely.” The less he says about Hakuei, the better. Kouen helps himself, picking up a mince pie here, a fruit tart there, not worrying about the rules of decorum of the grand hall and just eating with his fingers. “And I’m glad you’re back.”
Judal's eyebrows raise, but he shrugs, letting it go as he bites into a very, very fat peach once he clears a good portion of the table of a proper meal, sighing in satisfaction and flopping backwards as he sucks the juice out of it slowly. "I don't like her either, you know." It's said casually enough, and they both know to whom he refers. "I dunno why they do so much. I guess because she's strong. Creepy, though..."

"What I want," Kouen says slowly, eyes focusing on a pastry so he doesn't look too intensely at Judal--Hakuei had told him to watch that-- "is to know that I can count on you, no matter who I lead my armies against. If I can't have that, I want to know at least who I can trust you against. It's up to you."

"Well, I don't like her," Judal muses, his head tilting to the side. "And I don't like... well, I don't like most of the same people you don't like. So I guess you don't have to worry so much? I told you I'd help make the Kou Empire really strong, didn't I?"

"And Sinbad?" Kouen asks, filling a glass with water and drinking it down. "If I sent you against him, would you bring me back his head?"

Judal's nose wrinkles at that. "If he made me angry enough. I did tell him he'd be really fun to kill, and I meant it. But it'd be more fun to keep him as a pet, don't you think? Chained up to the foot of my bed... yeah, he'd look nice."

"I want him dead." Kouen eats a grape, feeling it burst between his teeth. "He's too powerful to leave alive, and there can be only one true king of this world. He will die, when I defeat him, either in battle or after."

That brings about a frown, and Judal twists onto his side, leaning onto an elbow as he takes another, slow bite from his peach. "Al-Sarmen wants him, too, you know," he eventually points out. "They have for awhile. They'd rather have him working for them, and it's not an impossibility that he could work for you, if that happens."

"He won't. I'll give him that much respect, he works for no one but himself." It probably doesn't count as "respect" when he says it in that tone of voice, but Kouen doesn't really care. "They're fools to think they can turn a man like that. Come, you can have anyone else from any country you like as a trophy. What about one of the Laem Emperor's grandchildren, I hear they come quite pretty."

It's the power that's part of the fun, don't you get that? Judal sighs long and hard, lips pursing into a deep pout. "But they're boring. I don't want them because they're pretty. I mean, that's a plus, but..."
"How about the little Magi, then? I don’t doubt he’ll worm his way into a battle sooner or later, and that’s quite a prize, don’t you think?"

"No. I hate him." Just the mention of that little wretch makes Judal tense and he grinds his teeth before sinking them into his peach too violently. "Why can't I have Sinbad? He's nothing without his generals and his country, he's easy to break."

“Because Sinbad is my enemy,” Kouen says quietly, his voice edged and precise. “And I do not let my enemies live. Not ever.”

Judal's eyebrows arch at that. "… Yeah? So that's why you sent Hakuryuu away, instead of killing him?"

Kouen snorts. “The day Sinbad is so powerless that I can send him wherever I please and make him do my bidding will be the day he isn’t worth killing.”

"So--"

*Let Al-Sarmen take his magic away.*

It's on the tip of his tongue, but Judal doesn't quite let it escape, thinking before he speaks (for once). Kouen would do it, definitely, and no matter how irritated Judal finds himself with that idiotic king of Sindria, he's not quite…*that* irritated yet.

"… so let me take his magic away." Judal nibbles on the last bit of his peach, flicking the pit onto his plate before reaching up to grab another. It isn't as if it's a total lie--he can block it well enough, faking it shouldn't be *that* hard, if it came down to it… "He wouldn't be worth killing then, right?"

Kouen narrows his eyes, looking at Judal over the top of his glass. “You’ve never in your life hinted that you could do such a thing.” A powerless Sinbad...the idea does have some appeal, and seeing the man useless, chained to Judal’s bed or simply to his knees all day...yes, there’s some appeal there.

Judal blinks at him, batting his lashes. "Yeah, well, if I told you all the experiments we did over in Al-Sarmen, you'd be bored as hell. I don't *like* doing it, feels weird, but that doesn't mean I can't if it
means I get to keep a fun pet.”

“Let’s have a wager, then,” Kouen says, because he is still in a good mood. “Whenever we capture him, he’ll be in your charge. If you can keep him from destroying anything or harming anyone until we return to the capital, he’ll be yours to keep. If not, I’ll have him executed.”

It’s probably as good as he’s going to get from Kouen. "Mmn, okay," Judal cheerfully agrees, because hell, he'll take it. It can't be that hard to convince Sinbad to behave, can it? "I'll take that wager, then. Just wait, I'll have him very well trained."

Kouen raises his glass. “To a thorough victory.”

Up goes his peach in kind. "Yeah, to victory!"
Chapter 6

Al-Sarmen doesn't oft whisper in his ear, these days.

That's not to say it doesn't happen. It does, once in a blue moon, and impossible thing to avoid when Ja'far is the one that silently sends out Sindria's spies, creeps along hallways himself unnoticed as necessary, and even slips into the desert himself as needed to listen (or kill) one night if absolutely needed.

Al-Sarmen lurks, after all, even within Sindria.

It's almost comical nowadays, playing the ruse of unaffected and perhaps vaguely interested in what they have to say. Better to be that way than be outright dismissive, because he has heard some interesting things over the years while pretending to be neutral. Now is no exception, though Ja'far finds it difficult not to laugh at the end of their spiel.

"My king?" Sinbad has recovered decently enough since Ja'far found him frozen to his bed (and less than clothed… how typical). At least, he looks a bit more regal perched upon his throne than he did in that particular state, and Ja'far considers that 'recovered' nowadays (because at least he isn't drunk-or asleep).

“News?” Ja'far has his face so carefully neutral, it can hardly be anything but news, and Sinbad has a missive of his own clenched in his hand. It isn’t written to him, but it tingles of import nonetheless, and he can hardly wait to discover what’s inside. “And I have a letter here for you, when you’re through.”

Ja'far pauses, sparing a last glance over his shoulder before the door slides shut behind him. "All in one day? Interesting." His head tilts as he steps closer to the throne. " Hopefully your letter comes from better company."

“I should hope so,” Sinbad remarks dryly, handing it over. “It came on the wind.”

Ja’far:
Look I have learned to right! My freind taught me he is a very nice man you will like him. I have met many freinds here in Mago Magna Magne here at school. I did not say I went to Sindria but I think you will like him.

I have a cuestion. I don do not think just anyone can answer this cuestion. What is the diffrense between doing evil and being evil? Please answer this is very important.

Love and take care!

Aladdin

Amazing, how such a simple thing can unravel tension from his spine in a heartbeat, no matter how normally he'd be breaking out in hives from the sheer urge to take red ink to the page. "Ah," he softly exhales, folding the letter back up with faint smile tugging at his lips. "Certainly better company. Odd, that he would send this to me, though, when Al-Sarmen breathed into my ear not an hour ago."

"And what does our little friend have to say, and our large enemy?" Sinbad asks, stretching his arms out before folding them behind his head.

"… He was asking me about the difference between doing evil and being evil," Ja'far answers, sighing as he tucks the missive into a fold of his robes, "and they were whispering lovely offers, suggesting I should betray you, rejoin them, they'd welcome me back with open arms, all for the price of aiding them in your downfall. Oh, and they would be sure to spare my loved ones as well." His eyebrows arch. "I wasn't aware I had those; I'm quite cold, according to Sharrkan."

"Sharrkan’s never seen you like I have," Sinbad says cheerfully. "You burn so easily in the sun, no one would ever call you cold." He watches the path of the missive, wondering what on earth Aladdin’s up to, up there in Magnoshuttat. "Al-Sarmen must be getting very nervous, if they're trying to come in my back door. I hope Kouen’s as frightened as they are to resort to such tactics."

The stare Ja'far offers is withering, even as he steps up onto the dais. "Not nervous, I think; just moving. Far faster than we are used to, at any rate." A sigh, and he neatly deposits himself at Sinbad's feet, crossing his ankles. "If Kouen were frightened, he would not send his armies away right now. He would keep them at home."
Sinbad reaches a hand down automatically, a reassuring touch he intends for Ja’far’s shoulder but winds up touching his face gently instead, cradling his cheek. “It’ll be fine,” he says softly. “Kouen is a planning man, and most plans fail, and quickly. The longer he takes to execute his first move, the more chance we have that it’ll collapse like poorly-baked bread. He’s hardly working from a solidified front.”

Ja'far's eyes lid, and he leans into the touch when he would normally shift away, calmed by the promise of closed doors if nothing else. "Most poorly laid plans fail," he slowly replies. "Try not to underestimate him. It never bodes well."

“I have heard many rumors of Kouen, and met the man myself,” Sinbad says, stroking a thumb down Ja’far’s jawline. “My people hear of him and think of a demon of old. He’s just a man, Ja’far. Young, powerful, ambitious, but still a man, and still as flawed as any man and prone to making mistakes. Being involved in three wars is hardly the work of an infallible mind.” He grins. “Of course, if you think I’m wrong, I’m sure Al-Sarmen would be happy to agree with you.”

Ja'far frowns, though he makes no attempt to move away, save to tilt his head back and rest it against Sinbad's knee more solidly. "I suppose I shouldn't worry, seeing as you are taking precautions above and beyond what you normally would, anyway."

That goes without saying, when Ja’far knows the majority of his military decisions better than Sinbad does himself. Instead of responding, he asks, “What will you say to Aladdin? Odd, that he would ask such a loaded question out of the blue--literally out of the blue, given how it was delivered.”

"I don't know," Ja'far honestly answers after biting his tongue for a short moment, doing his best not to chide Sinbad on his decisions that he thinks are less than well-advised. It's a little late now, anyway. "I hardly think I am the best person to ask about such things. It would be easier if I was there, or he was here, and I had the full story behind such a question.”

“Do you want to go to Magnoshuttat?” Sinbad asks casually, moving his hand up to stroke Ja’far’s hair. “It needn’t be a long trip, not with how swiftly you are used to traveling. I wouldn’t consider sending anyone else to such a hotspot, but I wouldn’t worry about you in such a place.” He’d be far more concerned about himself without Ja’far, always is.

Ja'far's head tips back thoughtfully at that. "I might be able to judge the situation there better, if I go, outside of just speaking with Aladdin," he slowly answers. "Though I am not sure it is wise. If something happens here while I am gone…"

“Trust your instincts.” Ja’far generally has good ones, even if he has to be reminded of their
existence every now and again. “Do you think it’s important enough to go? If so, I promise I’ll keep Sindria intact for you until you get back.”

"… Yes," is the reluctant reply. "I think there is a lot Aladdin doesn't want to put in a letter--smart child, that one--and if there is anyone he would relay it to, it would be me. Getting into Magnoshutatt is always a struggle, though, at the best of times. This might prove interesting."

Sinbad thinks for a moment, stroking his chin. “I’m not sure if it would make it better or worse for you to take Yamu,” he says slowly. “She’d be accepted there without question, but it would identify you without a doubt. If anyone can infiltrate unseen even by magic-using eyes, I know it’s you. Are you up for a challenge of your skills?” It’s been a long time since Ja’far’s had a proper one, just of his own skills without any politics involved.

"If I bring her, I’m immediately hindered," Ja'far dismisses. "I’d much rather go alone, and not have to watch for anyone else at the same time. And, well—if I am somehow captured, I'm not a magician. They aren't going to find me entertaining for very long."

“They’ll throw you into their pit,” Sinbad cautions. “I’ll expect weekly reports, and if you miss a week I will march into Magnoshutatt and get you out. Deal?”

"Assuming they can hold onto me long enough to throw me there." Ja'far tilts his head back, a wry smile tugging on his lips as he looks up at the other man. "If you march out to Magnoshutatt, I'll leap from that pit and bite your legs off. Or have you forgotten that one of us always needs to be here?"

“I haven’t forgotten. Consider it a threat.” Sinbad thinks about leaning down to give him a kiss, but it’s just a bit too far. “How fast do you think you’ll be able to make the trip? Take whatever you want from the treasury and armory, of course.”

"I don't need anything." Ja'far climbs to his feet, brushing off his robes before turning and placing a hand atop Sinbad's. "Given a clear path, a week, at a fast pace." He leans in, brushing his lips to the side of Sinbad's mouth. "Don't entertain that Magi while I'm gone."

Ja’far moves so fast. It isn’t just his movements in battle, but changes of mood, perception, decision, and Sinbad is fortunately used to the fact that he can introduce an idea and see Ja’far carry it out within a minute. He tugs his advisor down for a slightly longer kiss, more of a promise than anything. “Be safe. If you must abandon your mission to stay alive, abandon it. That’s an order.”
A stupid one Ja'far wants to say, because he is hardly so fool as to get himself into a situation that will end with him being killed. Honestly, wartime or not, this is perhaps one of his better uses, no matter how long it has been since he has had to truly infiltrate a place this high risk. "Of course, my king," he drawls, drawing away without batting an eye. "If all goes according to plan, I will be back sooner, rather than later."

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One thing Aladdin hadn’t really expected about war was that it would involve so much waiting.

The vast majority of the time, he and Sphintus and Titus have been sent back to their rooms, along with the rest of the magicians. There are enough scrying crystals and seeing pools for all the Farseeing magicians to see any army long before it approaches, and Aladdin finds himself spending most of his days wishing school would start up again so he’d have something to do. “Hey,” he says to Sphintus, rolling slowly on the bed until his head hangs upside down off of it, “you want to do an exercise challenge, so we keep in shape? Or…” he scans the room, looking for something they haven’t done a million times. “We could grab Titus and ask him to scry on the girls’ changing room for us.”

Sphintus stares at him, exhaling a slow, steady stream of smoke that he wishes did more to calm his own nerves. "… How can you be so damnedably nonchalant about all of this?" he asks, trying his best not to be annoyed. "This is war. Like--people dying." Titus possibly dying. "And you’re… seriously, there are more important things than boobs."

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it right now,” Aladdin says, drifting slowly over to land sitting upright again. Maybe Judal had been on to something, floating around like this is kind of fun. “It’s not going to be any easier to win a war if we’re angry and scared all the time. I was serious in the last battle, right?”

"… That wasn’t… ah, forget it, you're just a kid," Sphintus mutters, rolling over to offer Aladdin his back. "Just get some sleep or read or something, I dunno--hey, Kukulcan, get back here," he grumbles, scowling as the snake unwinds itself from his neck, slithering off the bed in short order. "Ahh, come on, I get cold without you there--"

"You really should mind your master."

Sphintus jumps, bolting upright as he’s fairly certain it's the wall that's talking--or maybe a shadow there? Oh, fuck, whatever it is, it's creepy, especially when a pale hand reaches out to scoop his goddamn cobra up, and Kukulcan hisses rather happily. "Shit--Aladdin, it's--we're--"
"Relax," is the succinct interruption, and stepping into the light of the room, Ja'far reaches up to unfasten the covering around his face, pulling it from his hair in short order as well. "My apologies, Aladdin, that I didn't have a chance to properly let you know when I'd be arriving."

Aladdin bounces off the bed in a fraction of a second, eyes lighting up as he reaches the window in a single stride, throwing his arms around the figure and hauling it further inside. "You're here! I didn't think you'd come! Did you get my letter? How did you get in? I missed you!"

Sphintus quickly concludes that Aladdin is also, apparently, friends with someone that looks rather like a ghost. Thus, he rolls back over, pulls a pillow over his head, and plays dead.

Ja'far spares the other boy a brief, curious glance before dismissing him with a mental shrug, and sets Kukulcan back down with a light nudge before letting himself be drawn further into the room by Aladdin. "Shh," he gently shushes, a hand on the Magi's head. "Voice down, you wouldn't want someone to know I'm here, would you? And of course I got your letter, I'm very proud you learned to write so quickly."

Aladdin claps a hand over his mouth, then pulls it away when he's sure he can talk quietly. "I wanted to send you a letter so I learned! It's really hard, but Sphintus is a good teacher--Sphintus, what…" He shakes his head, looking at his friend in full hibernation mode. "Well, maybe he'll want to meet you later."

"I think I startled him." Ah, well. It can't be helped. Ja'far eyeballs him a last time, contemplating. Sharrkan had mentioned he had a relative attending, and if he recalls the names of Heliohapt's royal family… well, nothing to worry about here, then. Aladdin always attracts that sort of luck, at least. "At any rate," Ja'far exhaltes, his attention turning swiftly back to Aladdin. "I came as soon as I got your letter. I'm sure there is much you need to tell me."

Aladdin bites his lip, then nods. "I want to show you something. We have to be careful, though, I'm not supposed to be...well, we just have to be careful. Sphin, you want to come?" It'll be easier to get Titus along if Sphintus comes, and Titus is really good at light magic.

"I'm a friend of your cousin, Sharrkan," Ja'far helpfully remarks, and that makes Sphintus slowly uncover his head, eyeing Ja'far a bit less warily.

"… You are?"
"Yes. My name is Ja'far, I'm an advisor to the King of Sindria."

It's clear as day on Sphintus's face what he's thinking--advisors don't make it into magician's cities with magical fortresses around them in the middle of the night--but he doesn't speak on any of that (good boy). "All right," Sphintus reluctantly says, sitting up. "I dunno what you need me for, though. Where are you taking him, Aladdin? If you get in trouble with the High Magicians again…”

“I’m not going to get in trouble,” Aladdin protests. “Not...if we don’t get caught? You guys can do whatever you went to do last time we went into the vault, this is only going to take a few minutes.”

"The vault? God, why do we have to go back there?" Sphintus bemoans, but throws his legs over the side of the bed anyway. "And 'you guys'--geez, are you seriously gonna make me ask Titus to come along? You know he's--he hasn't been feeling well at all."

“You could ask him,” Aladdin suggests. “I’m not gonna make him come or anything, and he was sleeping all day, and he said he was bored the last time we saw him--well, the last time I saw him, didn’t you two hang out last night?” He'd been trying to write another letter, and the little squiggles were hard. “Neither of you have to come, it would just be easier if you did.”

"I'll get him already," Sphintus mutters, grabbing for Kukulcan when the snake tries to slink off towards Ja'far again. "Meet us down there, it won't take me long to drag him out, I guess."

Ja'far's eyebrows lift. This one, at least, is nothing like Sharrkan--odd, because every other person he's met from Heliohapt is nothing but trouble. "It must be something very troublesome," he says as Sphintus hurriedly leaves the room, "if you needed me to come. You look--have you been eating well enough?" he frets. Sinbad would have a field day with this, picking on him later for 'mother henning' Aladdin. A good thing he isn't here.

“I’m eating okay,” Aladdin says slowly, “but I could be eating more okay. I miss Sindrian food.” He rests his head on Ja'far's shoulder, amused that it’s a lot easier now that he’s put on a few inches of height. “It’s important, I think. I think really important.”

He tugs on Ja'far's hand, leading him down the halls and stairs, ever-mindful of his surroundings. “So?” he asks quietly. “What’s the difference between people who do bad things and people who are bad?”
Slinking around a magician's veritable fortress would be much less nerve-wracking if he wasn't being tugged along by a Magi that isn't so aware as he thinks he is. Ja'far draws in a calming breath, letting Aladdin lead him all the same, confident enough in his own abilities that this shouldn't be too much of an issue. "... It depends, I think," he softly answers, "on what exactly the people doing bad things are doing them for. If it's for the greater good, for instance... to protect their loved ones, something like that. Eventually, though, one has to draw a line."

"But how do I know?" Aladdin asks, trying to keep his voice down more as they pass areas with a lot of people, using some of his magoi to keep his footsteps light. "If a good person attacks you for a bad reason and you kill them, are you killing a good person? And just because someone scares you, that doesn't make them bad, right? How do you know you're right about what's good and who's bad?"

"Aladdin," Ja'far sighs out, "what is this about, exactly? A specific example would make it far easier for me to give you my opinion."

Aladdin bites his lip. "I found...something. In the vault. That I think..." He takes a deep breath, seeing Titus leaning against Sphintus's shoulder up ahead, looking a bit more wan than he had the night before. "I think it could end the war, but a lot of people would die."

Ah. Well then.

"... Unfortunately," Ja'far slowly offers, "war tends to kill a great many people, anyway. If it's something that will end it more quickly..."

"Will you two hurry up?" Sphintus lowly hisses out, a steadying arm about Titus's shoulders. "I'm not letting him stay out all night, not like this, doctor's orders and all that."

“I’m fine,” Titus murmurs, giving Sphintus’s hand a little squeeze. “And my magic’s as strong as it ever was.”

Within a moment, an illusion is woven around each of them, light bending enough that strolling past the guards with a quick nod is an easy enough task. Odd, Aladdin had thought, that the vault is so much less well-protected than the Fifth Level, but then again, here they only have to worry about things getting in.

It’s a weight off Aladdin’s mind, to have Ja’far here. Ja’far understands things like this, and maybe
since Sindria isn’t fighting this war, he can give a much more unbiased opinion than Mogammet. “This way.”

Times like this, Ja’far wishes he were a walking scrying spell—all the better to let Sinbad see the insides of Magnoshutatt’s vaults so very clearly.

It begs the question of what exactly they are doing here in this city, considering some of the artifacts he lays eyes on, and aside from that, what sort of magicians they are training. Sphintus is one thing—a healer, Ja’far can tell at a glance—but the other one… never mind that being up close like this makes him wondering if the light is playing tricks on him, considering how very similar this Titus looks to Laem's Magi. It’s the raw ease of his power that’s a littleunsettling, reminding him of a Magi all the more, and Ja’far frowns, his list of mental notes to tell Sinbad of in his first report ever-growing.

"… I take it you must have seen a number of … interesting things, since you arrived here." Really, if the smattering of dark metal vessels isn't troubling to these three at this point...

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, lots.” Some of them have been less good and more horrifying, but they certainly fall under the heading of interesting. Even being near this many of Magnoshuttat’s items is enough to make him shiver, that same feeling he’d had the first time he’d seen Judal in person. “It’s….not like anywhere I’ve ever been before.”

The object in question is down another tunnel, and Aladdin leaves Sphintus to look at some of the medical implements as he proceeds further, letting a ball of fire drift in front of them to light the way. “It’s in here,” he says quietly, opening a room with only one object inside, floating on a pedestal, lit only by his own light.

A ring, just a ring, made of something like sharpened onyx sculpted into a symbol he’s rarely seen before, glitters in the firelight. It turns slowly, the dark aura it exhibits less obvious than most of the other objects here, more subtle, but more deadly.

It's very, very good that he came now, rather than later.

It begs the question of how did you know this was here all over again, but Ja’far bites his tongue, his eyes lidded. "… Have you seen it being used?" Better to be blunt about that sort of thing, at least.

“No.” Aladdin hugs his arms around himself, cold for reasons that have nothing to do with temperature. “Once someone puts it on, it works like a sickness on themselves, and everyone they
touch. I read about it in a really old book--okay, Titus read it, he can read anything. They talked about how you can only be safe from it if you don’t have any darkness in your heart, and with the way it moves….I think it means rukh.”

There is nothing about this that is good, and quite suddenly, everything about Aladdin's message, all of his questions in general, make quite a bit more sense.

"… I see." Ja'far reaches a hand down, making to draw Aladdin over when the boy shivers. "Then I suppose there is no one in this place, thankfully, that can use it," he mutters, mostly to himself.

“No one knows for sure, except a Magi,” Aladdin says quietly. “No one really thinks there’s darkness in their hearts, you know. Well, almost no one. Some people….some people know.” He swallows hard, looking up at Ja’far. “But what if it could be used? On someone from Al-Sarmen? That….that would change things, wouldn’t it?”

Ja'far shoves down the little shiver that rakes up his spine, an uncomfortable thought surfacing of what if Sin tried to use this thing--

No.

Definitely no.

"It seems… a little risky," he carefully murmurs rather than outright veto it. "But it's possible, certainly." And more important than that--getting such a thing out of here, away from these people and out of their hands.

“That’s why I had to ask. Because...if someone is doing things, bad things, for a good reason, I want to know if this would work on them. I think--I think the more dark there is, the worse it is, and the faster it goes, going by what Titus read, and I’ve never seen people with more black than the ones in Al-Sarmen.” A tinge of worry strikes through him, of how fast this thing would light up like a summer’s flame if it got near the Magi Judal. “If someone….” Aladdin swallows again. “If I could get it there, if I could get it deep into Al-Sarmen territory….well…..”

"… If it got into Kou, more like," Ja'far mutters, unable to stop the thought, and he exhales a slow, calming breath, no matter how that makes him think of how quickly this would all be over. It's almost like cheating, really--no, definitely is, and he far from relishes the idea of Aladdin's involvement any further than he already is involved. "I'm not so sure it would be entirely… safe,
even for you."

“A child could take it,” Aladdin says, and flushes pink at the admittance that he’s considered this, thought about it from many angles, more like agonized over it for a few weeks before even writing to Ja’far. “The book specifically said that it doesn’t work on children or adults that are pure of heart. And I…” He flushes again. “I tested it last time. I touched it, and it didn’t take. And I’ve touched loads of people since then, and nothing happened, so that part’s true.”

"We're going to have a discussion, later, about things you don't need to touch." Ja'far heaves a long sigh, briefly biting his lower lip in thought. "You aren't taking this into Kou," he says. "Not now." He's not stupid; the option need be there, just in case, but… "Either way, this needs to leave Magnoshutatt. The last thing they need is this option."

Aladdin refrains from pointing out that he’s discovered a lot of things (and people and general soft textures) that he never would have if he’d listened about things he’s not supposed to touch. “So where do I take it? Or where does anyone take it? I think...the only reason Mogamett doesn’t use it against his enemies is that he doesn’t know its here. He’d definitely send it with a goi--I mean, a non-magic child, if he knew.”

"You aren't taking it anywhere," Ja'far sternly says, shaking his head. "If it goes anywhere, it needs to come back with me, to Sindria." Where it will be kept away from this mess—not quite, but it's still better than being tossed into this particular war. "All the better, if Mogamett never knows it's here."

Aladdin hesitates. “I….you know I really like Sinbad, right?” he asks cautiously, twisting his sleeves in his hands. “It’s just….I’m not sure--are you sure that he could make sure not to touch it and use it? I don’t….he wouldn’t be safe, Ja’far.” And neither would you."

Aladdin’s cheeks flush, and he looks down at his toes. “Okay. Sorry. It’s really rare that someone doesn’t have any, you know. Almost no one. It’s not...that’s why I was asking, you know? Because some people have done, you know, not-so-nice things, and they’re still good people. I didn’t want you to think I was saying you were a bad person.”

"Still better that it is in Sindria than here," Ja'far slowly, steadily says. "And if you think I have interest in wearing it, you'd be wrong. It would be easier to keep an eye on at home, than wrapped
up here, when you need to focus on your own well-being."

Aladdin breathes a sigh of relief. “Okay. Thank you. I, uh, brought this.” He pulls a box out of his robes, tiny, scrawled all over with runes and squiggles. “I put spells on it, like a real magician! The strongest ones I could find, too. All I have to do is write the name of the person who’s supposed to open it, and no one else will be able to.”

He walks over to the podium, and claps the box shut around the ring. “Whose name should I write?”

It doesn’t take very long to think that one through, and Ja’far’s eyes lid. Magi or not, Aladdin is still a child. That’s painfully clear. War is, war, however, and at least like this, he’s shielding him somewhat. "Judal."

Aladdin swallows hard. He doesn’t hate Judal. He pities the older Magi more than anything, his loveless childhood, his misfortune in growing up believing in hatred and pain more than love and friendship.

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“Maybe,” he says without much hope, etching the runes into the metal with a finger and magoi, “what I did with Solomon’s Wisdom has worked on him. Maybe he’s come back to the light, and nothing will happen.”

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"Maybe," Ja'far softly replies, thought here's little confidence regarding such a thing in his own voice. "Either way, like this, it's at its safest."

Aladdin takes a deep breath, then hands the box over. "I knew you'd know what to do," he says gratefully, smiling up at Ja'far. "How are you going to get it to him? Does he still come visit Sinbad?"

"Occasionally." Better than that, I will hand deliver it to Kou and into that bastard's hands, if I need to. Ja'far smiles down at him, resting a hand back on top of Aladdin's head. "You don't need to worry about that. You've already done the difficult part, finding this thing and making sure I came here to help."

"There are a lot of other terrible things in here," Aladdin says softly, glad for the warmth of Ja'far's touch. Usually his fingers are cool, but today at least, they're comfortingly warm. "But most of them don't care who you are, and they only want to be used by evil."

"I've noticed a few." Ja'far frowns, toying with a strand of Aladdin's hair. "If I could, I'd bring them back with me to make sure they were destroyed. Unfortunately, the nature of this visit means I need to travel light... I'm hardly welcome in a place like this."

"You're really not supposed to be here at all," Aladdin agrees, a little sheepishly. "I'll hide you as well as I can, but the magicians here are really good. Most of them have been practicing since they were really little, and...I mean, Sphintus and Titus and I are really good too, but I don't want to fight them, they're my teachers and my friends and they're helping Titus stay alive." He frowns, scratching the back of his neck. "Everything is so complicated here."

"You needn't trouble yourself, Aladdin; I can hide myself well enough. Just pretend you don't even know that I'm here." He pulls his hand away after another moment, gently ruffling Aladdin's hair. "I'll stay out of your way, anyway, so it's even less for you to be concerned about, and won't be long, besides. I just need to do a little bit of information gathering before I leave." Ja'far pauses. "There is one thing, though--Titus, he looks startlingly like another Magi Sin and I know."

Aladdin's face falls at that. "He's....I'm not sure I should--"

"It's all right, Aladdin," comes a tired voice from the doorway. Aladdin turns, and Titus stands there, a worn smile on his face as he leans on Sphintus. "Everyone will know soon enough. This whole mess is because of me, after all."
Ja'far's head cocks to the side. "Then you are related to Scheherazade?" he forwardly asks. It would explain, when all of their other sources couldn't, why Laem was so quick to challenge Magnoshutatt this time around.

“You could say I am Lady Scheherazade, or a part of her.” Titus walks forward slowly, with his head held as high as he can manage, and extends a hand. “I call myself Titus Alexius, but I am no more than a magical creation of Lady Scheherazade the Magi. Or at least, I was. I hope...to be more.” He hesitates, gaze flicking to Aladdin. “If he’s a friend of yours, does he react to handshakes the way you do?”

“No,” Aladdin assures him cheerfully. “He shakes hands normally.”

Ja'far supposes he's heard odder things, though this is... certainly up there on his list. Sinbad will undoubtedly be lifting his eyebrows over this one, too. "Ja'far, advisor to King Sinbad of Sindria," he introduces as he takes Titus's hand, knowing there's little use in hiding his identity when Sphintus has undoubtedly already told him. And, well—Aladdin tends to have good taste in friends, for the most part, 'magical creation of Lady Scheherazade' or no. "Hopefully, this whole mess will be resolved soon enough. I dislike seeing magicians as young as you three are involved in something like this."

“It was never my intention to get anyone involved in anything,” Titus says quietly, “young or old. I want it to be resolved as much as anyone...”

Aladdin doesn’t like the sound of that. Titus has good days and bad days, but he’s been fighting hard against the weakness in his body, as his joints and bones slowly wear out. Today, he just sounds tired. “We should get back,” he says worriedly, with a nod to Sphintus.

Titus gives him a little smile. “All right. It was nice to read the books down here again, I found a story I want to tell Marga later. Milord Ja'far, I hope I haven’t inconvenienced you too much.”

"You haven't at all," Ja'far reassures him, trying not to let his gaze be a little too sharp, a little too analytical as he looks at Titus. He needs to do quite a bit more digging, if he's to understand exactly what is happening around Magnoshutatt. "The three of you should go rest, I'll be sure not to hinder you while I work."

"Rest--more like I'm tying you to your bed this time," Sphintus mutters, his arm sweeping firmly around Titus to drag him away. "No more middle of the night adventures."
“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Titus murmurs, and their images flicker into older, more respected, scholarly-type magicians before they turn the corner.

Aladdin squeezes Ja’far’s hand. “Will I see you again before you go?”

"If you like." Ja'far smiles, giving his hand a squeeze back. "I'll be around until I have enough information to go home with. I might need you to fill in the blanks, if the magicians here are less than forthcoming."

“They...might be. It’s hard to tell.” Aladdin grimaces. “Okay, they won’t be very friendly if you’re not a magician. Sorry, it’s the way they are. But you know where my window is, you can always come in! And Kukulcan seems to like you, and that’s the thing I usually warn gir--uh, anyone who, uh, comes in the window about.”

"Oh, they needn't be friendly. Mostly, I'll be listening. They won't know I'm here." Ja'far offers him a wry look. "You be careful," he sternly adds. "If you turn into Sinbad with his habits, I won't know what to do."

Aladdin gives him an easy, carefree smile. “With someone giving me such good advice, I can’t! Plus, wine makes me too dizzy,” he adds, and gives Ja’far another squeeze, taking off after his friends. “Sphin, wait up!”

It's a damnably long month.

Truth be told, it's only two weeks in Magnoshutatt, but they do drag. Ja'far finds himself recalling how unsavory this sort of job is, how 99% of it is standing about and waiting, hoping for a few interesting words to leave a person's mouth, and hoping something more interesting isn't going on somewhere else. While it's a challenge to remain hidden at the best of times, the entire population of the place is terribly distracted, and that works heavily in his favor, lending him several instances to avoid detection that he normally wouldn't have had.

It really is a mess, though, when it comes right down to it.

He forgoes another missive in favor of simply leaving, bidding Aladdin a farewell late one evening. If he had all the options in the world, Ja'far knows he'd simply take Aladdin back with him, but that isn't going to happen, if only because of the boy's determination to stay and see this through.
That being said, there's a good chance Ja'far might turn around and snatch him back up, should a battle heavily break out there while he's still in the vicinity.

Better that it doesn't, when he arrives too-early in the morning in Sindria a week later, most servants still rolling their way out of bed. Bed--yes, that's a nice thing, something he hasn't properly seen for a month, and Ja'far allows himself a few hours of collapsing facedown into it until the sun rises right into the sky and he drags himself up and out to bathe.

A real bath is a godsend, too, and a luxury Ja'far doubts he'll ever tire of, especially when the water is hot and he's content to soak away tension brewing for weeks on end in the privacy of his own chambers. A long sigh, and he sinks down until the water touches just below his chin, thinking he might catch another, short nap here before finding Sinbad. A little rest is well deserved, after all.

Before the water has stopped steaming, the door opens, and the king enters, humming a little tune under his breath. He looks at the bed, humming softly, and tosses his robes casually on the floor, far enough from the tub that they won't get soaked, avoiding eye contact as he switches to whistling, shaking out his hair before gracefully falling back into the tub, sending water splashing as he wriggles back between Ja’far’s thighs.

_Shriking_ would be entirely undignified, but really, in this circumstance? It's entirely justified.

"Sin!" Ja'far tries, once, to kick him and shove him off, but god, Sinbad's a _heavy_ bastard, and the way he flops on him doesn't exactly lend itself to getting rid of him. Ja'far huffs, flopping back, lifting a hand to wipe a dripping wet strand of his own hair from his face--and a handful of Sinbad’s, too, as it happens. "Unnecessary," he manages. "You are incorrigible. And _very_ unnecessary. You don't even _fit_, get _out_.”

“You should get another tub, a longer one. I’ve offered. It’s like you don’t even _want_ me in your bath.” Sinbad stretches out, which ends up in his knees being hooked over the sides of the tub--Ja’far’s right, he really _doesn’t_ fit. “And orders are for people who sent all their weekly reports on time and didn’t give their kings heart attacks.”

"I _don’t_ want you in my bath, you are correct," Ja'far mutters, giving the man a last, irritated shove before sagging back, resigned. "It was getting too tense there for me to risk contacting a spy and sending another missive, and I couldn't ask Aladdin to do it. They were being too stringent about outgoing contacts, they would have realized I was there. That's why I'm home earlier.”

“Good, then you can give me your report in person. And you don’t have to do it in code, so I want to know _everything_, even what you couldn’t put in your letters.” Sinbad lays back, resting his head on
Ja’far’s chest quite comfortably.

Ja’far sighs, tipping his own head back to let it briefly loll over the side of the tub. "The cause of the war escalating so quickly I had to be very vague about, I know. It seems for years now, Scheherazade has been making clones of herself. One of them decided to be a little bit rebellious while spying within Magnoshutatt, and doesn’t want to die and return to her. Of course, Aladdin has decided to become friends with it… him. Whatever. At any rate, she wants him—Titus—back. That’s the long and short of the war on Laem’s side right there, never mind the veritable armory full of dark metal vessels."


"You'd go insane." Ja'far shifts, wriggling to grab for the soap as he properly gathers up all of Sinbad’s hair, even that which spills over the side of the tub. "Titus, apparently, is growing weaker by the day because of now being disconnected from her, as far as I can tell. I did a bit of spying on him and his, ah, other friend, Sphintus. You know, Sharrkan's cousin, ironic how all of these people seem to meet up," he mutters, starting to lather up his king's hair. "The main reason Scheherazade seems to want him back is there is a good chance of him falling to depravity, and thus a part of her would as well. The last thing we need is another Magi with black rukh, if you ask me."

Sinbad shivers at the thought. “One is enough. I hope.” His eyes slide shut at the feeling of Ja’far’s skilled fingers working through his hair, something no one ever does as well as Ja’far. “Still, it seems unlikely, if he has such strong friendships as you’ve hinted. And to be honest, if he’s as weak as all that he shouldn’t be too hard to do away with should he fall. Mmm…tell me more about this armory of dark objects. Did you bring your king a souvenir?”

"I did." His fingers knead along Sinbad's scalp, working the soap through thoroughly. "But you don't get to see it. I would have brought other things for you to poke and prod at, but the nature of the job required that I travel rather light."

“You’re terribly cruel to me,” Sinbad murmers, turning to place a kiss to the inside of Ja’far’s upper arm. There are unspoken words, I missed you and I worried for you and no one else’s hands on me are the same as yours, and they stay unspoken. “What shall I do with it, if not see it?”

"Well," Ja'far amends, giving Sinbad's hair a little tug to coax his head to the side and back into the water rather than his chest. "you can look at the box, I suppose. Shut your eyes." Rinsing Sinbad's hair out in such tight quarters is easier said than done. "Aladdin sealed it so only one person can open it, when the time is right. It's an artifact that works on those that are corrupted—when worn, it spreads a sickness to themselves, and anyone that they touch. Through their rukh, we can only presume."
Sinbad makes a face, worming his head back into the water. “Then I should be glad I can’t open it, hmm? Otherwise I’d have to question whether Aladdin really has my best interests at heart.” Something he’s questioned before, but there’s no reason to bring that up, especially since Ja’far dotes so on the child. “I assume this is a fail-safe? In case all is lost, and our enemies are at our doorstep? I don’t want to unleash anything like that on the world.”

Ja’far hums, rinsing Sinbad’s hair clean before hoisting him back up with a little shove. “It does not need to be opened here on our doorstep. Far better, would be somehow depositing it into the heart of the Kou Empire. I told him,” he casually adds, “to seal it with Judal’s name.”

Sinbad’s head jerks up, shoulders tense. “I know you think him…unsalvageable,” he mutters, “but this is a little far, don’t you think? To unleash such a plague, because you dislike the boy? To target him with it? He’s hardly more than a child.”

He expected this, honestly. Ja’far heaves a sigh, leaning back to lather up his own hair with a quiet snort. “It has nothing to do with my dislike. Wake up, Sin. There’s a reason why his rukh is entirely black. He’s declared war on Sindria, even after all you've tried to do to help him again and again. He leaves you frozen to a wall or a bed or half-dead each time that he visits. I think it goes beyond unsalvageable.”

“Then why hasn’t he chosen Kouen?” At least when Sinbad has nothing else to cling to, he still knows that much. “I’m not defending his actions, not after what happened in Partevia, I just don’t know that….” He huffs out a breath, flopping back onto Ja’far. “Except I am, and there’s no reason for it. Still. Only in last case, yes? Otherwise who knows how far it would reach? To us, it’s possible.”

“Only in last case,” Ja’far agrees, and he shimmies down, pushing Sinbad up and off of him for just a moment, long enough to dunk his head and rinse his own hair. "I don't claim to understand what Judal does, let alone why he hasn't chosen a very eager king," he says as he comes up, pushing his bangs from his face as he flops back again. "But I don't trust him to do the right thing at all, and I certainly don't trust him not to hurt you. If it comes down to it, I will personally deliver that thing to his doorstep."

Sinbad twists awkwardly around until he’s perched across Ja’far, straddling his hips as well as he can in the cramped surroundings, bodies sliding wet and slippery against each other as his hair pools down around them. “Not you. I won’t ever have you within a hundred leagues of that thing. Never, never you.” He leans down, claiming Ja’far’s mouth with his own, wet and a little soapy, sucking Ja’far’s lip into his mouth.
Ja’far opens his mouth to protest—there’s hardly enough room for this, he’s still tired and aching besides—but what hope is there to argue with Sinbad when the man is like this, his mouth so hot and it’s not fair when he’s kissed like that. "Sin--" It’s as much a protest as he can manage when he groans, a hand sliding up through the wet, dripping mess of Sinbad’s hair all the same, coiling it about his fingertips as he lurches up to kiss back with a slow, languid sigh. "I don't really care," he murmurs between kisses. "If I needed to, I’d do it. Better me, than Sindria's king."

Sinbad grunts out a negative, displeased with the verbal response no matter how pleased he is with the nonverbal one, nipping at that full lower lip as he kisses the other man again and again, everything sliding differently against him in such a position, in such a place. “If you ask me to choose between my country and you,” he murmurs, hands braced on warm porcelain, “I will be very unhappy. Never make me make that choice, Ja’far.”

You’ve already made it, you idiot are the words on the tip of his tongue, but Ja'far swallows them back, shifting and wriggling to better wrap his thighs about Sinbad's hips, his breath hitching hard at the slick, slippery drag of their bodies. "Don't bring it up, then, and you won't have to listen to me do it," he mutters, tipping his head up to nip at Sinbad's lower lip in kind.

“How about,” Sinbad says with a grin, hands grabbing at Ja’far’s hips, hoisting them up so he can rub against him, the hardening line of his cock grinding down against Ja’far’s, “instead, I just win this bloody war without having to resort to magical tricks? Not so hard a thing, for a living legend, eh?”

Breath leaving him in a ragged, broken rush, Ja'far scrabbles for purchase, grabbing at the edge of the tub and biting at his lower lip to keep back an entirely too-telling groan. "I would certainly prefer that," he gasps, his head tipping back to loll over the side of the tub as his toes curl, wriggling down with the arch of his back to savor the long, heated slide of his cock against Sinbad's. "Your ego... makes me want to kick you, though--"

"Mmm, it isn’t ego if it’s true, is it?" Sinbad teases, even as his breath hitches, hips canting down in a slow, easy motion. It’s been too long, it’s always too long, and Ja’far is bucking so sweet up against him, tasting of nothing and wet and slippery, and he can’t help but press down harder in a heady, rapid rhythm. “I know it’s true. I’ve read the books. I’m a very impressive king.”

"An impressive idiot," Ja'far groans, his hips twitching up as his eyes slide shut, thighs squeezing tighter about Sinbad's waist as his cock throbs with each slide of Sinbad against him, hot and hard and eager. "C...can you just... shut up? Maybe then it would be less your ego that I have to stroke more often than not--"

Sinbad laughs aloud at that, though it turns into something lower and more primal feeling Ja’far rock up against him. He starts to say something, but cuts himself off, burying his face in Ja’far’s neck,
nibbling on the familiar skin, groaning as he slides down, hotter and harder and aching with every
thrust, and he knows that if it weren’t for the soapy water they’d still be slick, leaking desperately
against each other. “You feel good,” he groans, and that’s all he has time for before he spills, heat
blooming between them in the water.

Ja’far exhales a fast, shuddering breath, his own head tilting up to bury his face into Sinbad’s
shoulder, teeth setting to taut, tanned skin as he bucks up, eyes rolling back at the hot, slick slide of it
all. He comes with a swallowed back groan of his own, the tremors sliding down to the tips of his
toes, and it’s a long moment before he sags down, untangling his shaking fingers from the length of
Sinbad's hair.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” Sinbad admits, a little shakily. He bends down, pressing a kiss to Ja’far’s
shoulder, cool now that it’s out of the water. “But...welcome home, all the same. It’s different when
you’re not here.”

"You don't mean to do a lot of things," Ja'far rumbles, sighing as he gives the man a little shove.
"Off. I'm not lazing about in dirty water. If I'm home, I'd rather enjoy that, besides."

Sinbad climbs to his feet, stretching as he stands, the broad muscles of his back rippling. “And what
do you want to celebrate your return? Not a feast, not a party, not.....how about an evening to
yourself, with all the books you choose, and a servant to bring you tea at every ring of the bell? I’ll
stoke the fire myself.”

"How about a proper nap?" Ja'far hauls himself from the water, shivering as he grabs for a towel. "I
don't think magicians ever sleep, so I didn't much, either."

Sinbad snorts. “I’d never thought I’d see the day when you were asking me for a nap.” He raises an
eyebrow, leaning on the wall with one hand. “Alone?”

Ja'far pauses, considering. "Well, you did want to see the inconspicuous box that I brought back with
me. Do you think you can keep your hands to yourself otherwise? I'm serious when I say I might kill
you in my sleep if you don't, I'm still a little wired."

“Far be it from me to disturb my best spy’s well-earned sleep,” Sinbad says with a grin. He wraps an
arm around Ja’far’s waist, brushing a kiss to his forehead. “Meet me in my chambers, the bed is
nicer. And bring your toy.”
"… That phrasing," Ja'far deadpans.

Sinbad blinks, then his mouth curls into a smile. “How lewd of you, to find something erotic where I was being so innocuous.” He opens the door, strolling out as he calls back over his shoulder, “Hell, bring as many toys as you want!”
If there’s one thing Sinbad doesn’t like about rainy weather, it’s missing his morning run. It has a lot to do with morale, because even if he does make the effort and go out in the rain, no one is there to watch him run around shirtlessly.

It’s been a week since he’s been able to run, and he stretches slowly in the early morning light, slipping quietly out of his bed so as not to wake Ja’far. He lingers for a moment, watching moonlight hair streaming across his pillow, before tucking fabric around his chest, taking off down the stairs.

It feels good to stretch his legs, good enough that he forgets how antsy he’s been plans of Magnoshuttat and dark artifacts and Laem and Kou fading under the rush of good feelings, every time his feet hit the sand, muscles pulling in his legs as he stretches out. For a little while, water sparkling in his vision, hair trailing behind, he forgets about everything.

Then he stumbles on an unconscious woman lying on the beach, and everything changes.

He drops to his knees, propping her head up on the shore, and gives her face a gentle tap, then bends down to listen to her heart. Still beating, but she’s not breathing, and he mutters a quiet apology as he tries to breathe air into her lungs.

For Ren Hakuei, the world spins hazily back into focus, and there’s a weighty, heavy pause before she exhales, chokes, and coughs up the water clogging her lungs in one heavy rush.

As her mind tries to process beyond breathe breathe breathe, it's easy to imagine the hands brushing against her face, large and calloused and surprisingly gentle, as Kouen’s. Easier still, when she wants them so badly to be, when the empire and the Imperial City seem so very, very far away--

Abruptly, the world spins back into focus, and she grimaces, squeezing her eyes shut to force away the dizziness to follow. It takes but a moment, and she stares up through her lashes at her savior-apparent.

Not Kouen.
Definitely not.

It takes what's left of her willpower not to curse out loud.

Sinbad sits back on his knees with a sigh of relief, wiping vomited water off his face with the back of his hand. “Ah, thank the gods, you’re alive, I hate finding corpses on the beach, such a bad omen in the morning. Miss, please allow me to help you back to the city. Can you walk? I can carry you.”

Hakuei can’t decide if it’s a blessing or a curse that he doesn’t know who she is. It's certainly enough to have her own heart pounding in her chest, because she knows who he is--hard not to, having listened to her cousins and Judal alike go on about him for one reason or another. “… I can walk,” she rasps, forcing herself up onto her elbows with another, ragged cough. "I… was there anyone else?” That’s enough to make her panic for an entirely different reason. Glancing out over the shore, it looks startlingly, terrifyingly empty.

“I haven’t seen anyone else,” Sinbad says cautiously, helping the woman to her feet. It’s hard not to notice that she’s stunning, nicely curved with a delicate, yet still determined bone structure. “But it’s very unusual for anyone or anything to wash up in this area, the current usually brings them to the other side of the island. It'll be no trouble at all to go check. How many were in your wreck?”

There's a special place in hell for her mother.

Hakuei's teeth grind, and as she climbs to her feet, she realizes very abruptly exactly how in tatters the remainder of her clothing is. Oh, and of course her metal vessel wouldn't be in sight, either. She can only hope it's with Seishun, and not at the bottom of the damned sea. "A great number," she murmurs crossly, folding an arm over her chest for some semblance of modesty.

Without a pause, Sinbad strips off everything but his underclothes, wrapping it around her shoulders. He runs quickly through the list of who she could be, narrowing it down to three or four women, one of whom is “mystery woman that’s about to bring my country a great change in fortune either good or ill.” “Not to worry, Miss. If they're close, we’ll find them, and you’ll be reunited before you know it.”

Drawing a slow, calming breath, Hakuei makes a mental note to gently suggest that Kouen not kill the King of Sindria--at least, not slowly or painfully--if he continues to be as chivalrous as all of the legends and rumors do not imply.
"... Thank you." Hakuei tilts her head to properly look at him. Well, she has a few options. She can lie, and potentially risk the lives of any of her men that do show up on his shoreline, or she can be straight forward, and undoubtedly kept as a prisoner of war in some regard. Neither are terribly lovely options, but lying only seems to make things more difficult. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you are Sinbad, the King of Sindria?"

"The legends precede me!" Sinbad breaks out into a childishly gleeful grin, sweeping a low bow. "Either you've seen me from afar or my looks are truly the stuff of gossip on distant shores." Either way, he'll take it as a compliment, and his chest swells with it as he bows low over her hand, brushing his lips across the back of it. "And whom do I have the honor of addressing?"

No matter how exhausted she is and how bad this situation is--ah, Kouen is going to lose his mind, if he hasn't already--Hakuei has to laugh, her free hand lifting to pull her makeshift clothing just a bit tighter around her shoulders. "Perhaps the honor should be mine, to remain standing around such a king," she lowly replies. "I am Ren Hakuei, the First Princess of the Kou Empire."

One of Sinbad’s four guesses clicks into place, and his smile doesn’t waver. It grows a little sharper around the edges, but it never fades. "Then I am truly honored to be graced with your presence. Will you accompany me back to the palace? Of your own will, I assure you. If at any time you desire to leave, you’ll not be held. I swear it on my country."

She believes that about as far as she can throw the man--which in her current state, isn't very far. "I would be honored. I thank you for your hospitality. And," Hakuei wryly adds, "for what it is worth, my ships were hardly headed in your direction. An unexpected storm caught us."

“I’m sorry for your loss. I’ll send men out searching for your compatriots as soon as we reach the--ah, there, he is.” Sinbad lets out a loud whistle, waving a hand at a cloud of dust, and moments later, Masrur jogs up on the sand, distaste on his face that no one but Sinbad would be able to read, knowing how much the Fanalis hates walking on loose sand, cursing the lack of traction under his feet. "Masrur, tell Drakon to send out search parties along the Demon’s Cauldron area, look for any washed-up survivors, escort them back to the city. And tell Ja’far to have the royal guest quarters prepared for Princess Hakuei."

“Understood.”

He vanishes in a cloud of sand, and Sinbad offers his arm. “Shall we, Princess?”

Survivors. What an annoying word.
Hakuei shoves it from her mind, shutting her eyes briefly to shove away another wave of dizziness as she takes hold of Sinbad’s arm. How troublesome, to think that if this were her country, this king would hardly be treated with such respect upon washing up on their shores. Things she will need to bring up to Kouen soon enough, indeed. “I can only thank you again for your kindness.”

Given the chance to bathe and dress properly, Hakuei would feel a semblance of better, though it’s still toward the shoreline that she spares a worried frown. There should have been other survivors. It was hardly her djinn that saved her in the wreck, and her metal vessel is now nowhere to be found, besides. Worry about yourself a bit, instinct tells her--stranded in an enemy country, minus an army, minus her metal vessel, minus everything--Not quite everything, she reminds herself, sliding a hand low over her stomach as she draws a steadying breath. At least her mother hasn’t been able to take that away from her.

Sinbad takes some pride in the way the city gates fly open at his approach, and in the way the shopkeepers smile and wave and call out to him as he leads her down the streets. “Mind the ankle, Amir!” he calls, and a man grins, taking a bite out of an apple. “Tansi, catch!” With one hand, he tosses a sweet from his pocket to a little girl, who snatches it out of the air with a giggle. “It’s still too early for most of the folk to be about,” he says to Hakuei, nodding at a passing couple, catching sight of one of his sons dangling upside down from an awning with a couple of his friends, playing a game of chase with some local boys. “But you’ve come on a good market day, though of course I’m sure it was no intention of yours.”

“Majesty, have you finally listened to the petitions and foregone clothing?” a woman shouts out a second-story window, and Sinbad laughs.

“What should I tell the clothmakers then, Risali?”

“Never mind that,” a man yells. “That’s why I’m missing my wife!”

“Go check the palace,” a woman says from the window above him, and empties a bucket of dishwater on the man’s head to raucous laughter from the whole street.

Certainly, a world different from Kou.

Hakuei’s mouth curves into a slow smile and she slowly shakes her head. "You have a lovely, lively
country," she mildly offers. "My cousin and brother have said much of it, and only happily. If I have to crash upon the shore of an enemy, I suppose this would be high up on my list of choices."

“Only an enemy by the will of Kou,” Sinbad says, voice friendly and light. “We’re not a warlike people, only interested in defending what is ours. How are Hakuryuu and Kougyoku, if I may ask? I think of them often. Many of us here do.”

More like the will of a loud-mouthed brat, if you ask me. That would be overstepping, though, wouldn’t it? “… They fare well enough,” Hakuei allows with an incline of her head. "I do thank you, for guiding Hakuryuu for the short time he spent here."

“I did as well as I could. He’s...a strong spirit, isn’t he?” Sinbad asks diplomatically, leading her along the inner circle of the city, up the winding way to the Palace stairs. “Nearly as strong as his sister, if half of what I’ve heard of you is close to the truth, Princess.”

Hakuei bites back an amused snort as she follows at his heels, eyes keenly sweeping over the layout of the area. She's so tired that she doubts she'll remember it later, but it's worth a try, all the same. "That depends on what you've heard, Your Majesty."

Sinbad notes the way her eyes dart around, and grins. “I can have a map drawn up for you, if you like.” He nods to a clerk bustling around outside the palace, twitching a finger. “Have a map of Sindria drawn up for the lady, Esviel.”

“Yes, Majesty.”

"… Forgive me," is her wry response to follow, though she hardly sounds apologetic. "I suppose I have been on the battlefield for too long. It is something of a habit now."

"Your Majesty."

Hakuei glances up, and the sight at the top of the stairs isn't quite what she expects. Well, at least, not with the scathing look that's fixated upon Sinbad for all of a split second, when it comes from a pale, slight man that looks like he'd be best suited for deskwork above all else (I was hoping I heard incorrectly, that looks says). "The princess's rooms have been prepared accordingly."

“Excellent!” Sinbad says, beaming no matter the cloudy look he’s been given, hardly for the first
time. He leads Hakuei down a corridor, stopping outside a carved door, opening it to reveal sumptuous furnishings. He bends down and kisses her hand again, then says quietly, “Know this, Highness. Princess or slave or enemy, any man, woman, or child who washed up on my shore is treated the same, save that I have few beds as nice as this one. Anyone who comes to my country without offering it violence is my guest, and your men will be shown courtesy. When they are found, you will be the first to know.”

Hmmm. That's twice now in less than an hour. Hakuei wonders if he kisses the hand of every foreign dignitary so oft, or just the decent-looking ones. "... I can assure you, Your Majesty, that neither I nor my men mean your country harm." With a smile, she withdraws her hand. "I thank you again for your hospitality, as you have been most accommodating. Perhaps given a chance to bathe and make myself look a bit more presentable, we can have a more in-depth conversation."

“I certainly look forward to it. Any servant can lead you to me, and don’t hesitate to ask for anything you need.” Sinbad bows again as he exits. “Welcome to Sindria, Princess.”

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She doesn't quite expect to hit that bed after a long, hot bath and sleep for a good twelve hours.

Apparently that's what she needs, though, and so Hakuei doesn't question it when she wakes up feeling a dozen times better, if not still dizzy, sore, and entirely too worried about the state of her men. Would word have spread to Kou by now about this? Stressful, thinking En would hear about a shipwreck, wondering if she's even alive.

Then again, the man would also stress knowing she's dressed in Sindrian clothing at the moment. Things I won't mention Hakuei wryly thinks to herself, and combs her hair out herself, pulling the clasp from the front of her hair to snap it around a generous portion in the back, leaving the rest down. Kouen would never, ever think to treat an enemy washed up upon their shores this well, no matter how Hakuei thinks she certainly would. She makes a note to be there as soon as she possibly can, and to advise him to change a few of his tactics.

True to Sinbad's word, there isn't exactly a guard posted on her door, though there are a few servants just down the hall that are quite eager to please, even when she requests an audience with the king. That advisor is there again when Hakuei arrives, giving her one, fleeting side-eye that is entirely too analytical, leaving her to repress a shiver when he slips from the throne room as little more than a ghost blending with the walls. "... Your Majesty," Hakuei offers, hands clasped as she bows low. "My apologies for sleeping the day away. It seems as though I rather approve of Sindrian beds."
“Not at all!” Sinbad bows from the throne, inclining his head in a greeting to a foreign dignitary, not quite the warmth of a reception shown to a shipwrecked lady in the presence of more of his countrymen. “Sindria’s hospitality is at your disposal, and after the ordeal you’d gone through, I have no doubt that you needed the sleep.”

He hesitates, then says, “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but my people have found no trace of your men on my shores. Not even wreckage, which can only mean they’ve washed up somewhere else, most likely South of here given the currents. I attempted to send a message to Kou with word of your safety, but…” He smiles thinly. “It was rebuffed.” His messenger had barely escaped with his life, and even now lies screaming from the wound of a poisoned arrow, Yamuraiha’s skills being put to the test.

Hakuei grimaces at that. "I see. We do currently have something of a … policy, regarding missives from Sindria right now." She straightens, heaving a sigh. "Nonetheless, it would be best if word can somehow be sent to the empire as soon as possible. General Kouen tends to be short-tempered when it comes to his relatives."

Sinbad raises an eyebrow. “If you have any ideas that wouldn’t result in a loss of life, I’m more than eager to hear them. Believe me, I’m hardly excited to see more of General Kouen’s temper. And Empress Gyokuen,” he adds smoothly, “though I’ve heard she’s a little more….unpredictable.”

"… I will think of something." Sooner, rather than later, and ah, no, they are not talking about her mother right now. "I apologize again for this… grave inconvenience. If there was a way for me to leave quickly and no longer be a hindrance to you, I assure you, I would take it."

“Your presence, Princess, is no inconvenience. Only the matter of reassuring your family as to your welfare presents a challenge that I’m sure,” he says with a long look to the side, “my advisors are working on meeting. In the meantime, may I tempt you with a feast? Though some trade routes are closed, down south we have quite the selection of produce you may not be accustomed to.”

"I'd be honored, of course." It might make her feel a bit more human, at least, and there is a niggling little reminder that she's eating for two and should stop stressing and definitely be worrying more about herself for that very reason.

The dining hall in Sindria may not be as expansive as the ones Sinbad had seen in Kou, but Sinbad will take the company any day, and the food is nothing to sneeze at either. He notices a conspicuous lack of Ja’far, and relaxes a bit. If the man can’t get a spy into Kou with a missive, Sinbad doesn’t doubt he’ll think of something else, or go himself. Knowing Ja’far, Sinbad probably wouldn’t even know he’d gone until he returned, he’d leave such little trail.
A roast pheasant is set before the princess, and Sinbad carves it with a smile. “Please take no offense, Princess, but from the tales of your valor on the field, I hardly expected you to be such a young, such a lovely woman.”

And so it begins.

It’s hardly unexpected. Sinbad isn’t the first king to start off complimenting her prowess on the battlefield and move onto complimenting other things, and so Hakuei has to laugh at that, entirely unfazed. "None taken. I realize most men think, for a lady to have any sort of ability on the field, she must be old and wizened."

“Hardly, having met your cousin. And a few of my generals,” Sinbad says with a laugh. “It was only that I’ve heard tales of the woman equal to Kou’s famous Red Scourge, with a voice that could stop a mob in full cry and goes around in full armor.”

"… Except unlike the Red Scourge, I tend to leave cities intact,” Hakuei drawls, forgoing the glass of wine set before her and taking a slow sip of water instead. "But I certainly have stopped a few mobs in my day, and one does tend to wear armor when going into battle unless one is intent on being a careless idiot."

Sinbad shrugs. “Most of the female warriors I know prefer to be a bit less clothed. They claim it’s a distraction to their enemies, and I can’t say I blame them. Do you prefer white to red, Highness?”

"Most female warriors," Hakuei bluntly says, "are careless idiots. And forgive me, Your Majesty, I’ve never been fond of alcohol, least of all nowadays."

“My apologies,” Sinbad says, and with a wave of his hand, the wine is removed from the table, replaced, by a variety of juices by a pair of servants. “I hope the food, at least, is to your taste.”

"Oh, it is! And don't apologize, it's a habit born of having one too many relatives that enjoy drinking in excess," she laughs. "Someone has to put them to bed, you know."

It's probably risky to ask, but--"So you have not been able to send a messenger to Kou… I suppose that means you have not heard of my family's movements either, then?” Now, how to phrase questions about Gyokuen without letting him know of the unrest in court.
Sinbad’s eyes dance at that, over the rim of his wine goblet. “Not being able to send a messenger and being totally insulated are two different things, Princess. Perhaps if you were curious about something in particular, I could assuage your worries?” Being hospitable and being stupid are also two different things, as are showing mercy and handing over information.

Hakuei smiles, setting down her fork as her fingers lace together atop the table. “I was on my way south when my army was ambushed, and due to our position, nearly three fourths of my army was lost. It was almost as if someone knew exactly where I was, and where I was going. I, too, was captured, held for several days before I escaped, and with the remainder of my men, took to our last remaining ship to retreat. Most of all, I was curious regarding the empire’s response to that particular happenstance. Whether or not General Kouen has responded yet has quite a bit to do with Sindria’s safety as well, I’m afraid.”

Ah. Now, that is information that Sinbad can take in trade. “It so happens,” Sinbad says slowly, exchanging a look with Drakon, “that just today I received a report on current troop movements. All prone to being inaccurate of course, and your brothers--sorry, cousins, you do have an interesting family--are different levels of skilled at evading my spies. It would seem,” he says, holding her eyes, “that if Kouen is as quick to respond to your peril as you seem to think he will be, he’s heard nothing of it yet. I’ve had no word that the main force of his armies have moved.”

“… I see.” Hakuei sinks back with a slow, measured exhale, a mix relieved and worried at the same time. There’s a good chance Gyokuen is killing off any messengers that would relay such news, so as to stall Kouen just a bit from acting--and perhaps to give more time to have her killed, after all.

If that’s even what her mother is after. She seems to find this game of slow torture far more interesting. “If you do hear of it,” she slowly replies, “might I suggest you relay the information to me? I would like to be prepared, at least, if one of my relatives is to arrive. I will make sure they cause you no harm.”

“Your concern for my well-being is touching, and very much appreciated.” Sinbad waves, and the savory courses are removed, replaced with summer fruits and iced desserts. “In the meantime, what are your plans? Do you intend to return to Kou? I can have you escorted as far as the borders, but that’s a dangerous place, even for a woman so formidable as yourself.”

“Your concern for my well-being is touching, and very much appreciated.” Sinbad waves, and the savory courses are removed, replaced with summer fruits and iced desserts. “In the meantime, what are your plans? Do you intend to return to Kou? I can have you escorted as far as the borders, but that’s a dangerous place, even for a woman so formidable as yourself.”

"That is, ultimately, why I need to get in touch with someone from my family." Stress does take a toll on her appetite, but she's already been rude enough when it comes to refusing wine. The things I do
for you and your brat of a child, Hakuei dryly thinks, idly nibbling on a slice of apple. "I may be needed elsewhere--or they may be able to send someone to retrieve me, should you allow it."

“I’m sure something can be arranged. As I said,” Sinbad reminds her, “I have no intention of keeping you prisoner. Though, it may reassure some of my advisors to hear from your own lips where your loyalties lie.” He leans forward, popping a frozen sweet cherry into his mouth. “With Kouen? Or the Empress?”

Oh, that’s cute. Hakuei’s head tilts, another smile tugging at her lips. "What an odd question, Your Majesty. General Kouen is loyal to the Empress himself, and our family does tend to follow his example."

Sinbad laughs aloud, tossing a caramel grape into the air and catching it in his teeth. “Of course, of course. Far be it from me to put an end to the games.” Despite that her army moves without any regard for the other Kou armies, and your policy about messengers is a lot better at keeping information out than in. “In that case, I fear it will be more difficult to return you to your native land, no matter how I would wish to. One of the many Kou armies, as it certainly doesn’t matter who is leading it, currently sits between Sindria and Kou, and another in the ocean.” He swallows the grape. “It’s a good thing your country is so united. Otherwise, it would look terribly uncoordinated.”

One of these days, she really is going to enjoy seeing her mother’s head on a damned pike. Hakuei blinks back impassively all the same. "Well, then, as I suggested--perhaps it will be more convenient for an escort to come to me instead of troubling you with the travel. I daresay you might be shellshocked by our culture anyway, should you pay us another visit. Last time, you were mostly about the palace, am I correct? The borderlands are quite a different story, and if a lady has trouble handling herself out there, I do indeed fear for a man."

Sinbad bites his tongue on a marriage proposal. God, but she’s fierce, and he loves that in a woman. “Sindria will indeed be sad to see you go,” he says, shaking his head. “Of course, you’re welcome to have an escort to one of the armies. I assume it doesn’t matter to you which one?”

Hakuei merely smiles back. "Sindria has me for the time being, doesn't she? And certain generals and I are more… well-acquainted than others; I suppose I will wait to hear who is out and about." And not beneath Gyokuen's thumb.

“In the meantime,” Sinbad says graciously, “Sindria couldn’t be happier to be your host. Are you quite rested? There are many entertainments for a young lady in Sindria of an evening, or of course you’re welcome to retreat to your chambers. Forgive me for saying something, but you look in much too fresh and vital spirits for a young woman who had been in a shipwreck the day before.”
"I suppose I am just quite lucky to be mostly uninjured, don't you think? There are few reasons for me not to feel well, after your hospitality, besides." *Tone it down, Paimon* is what Hakuei thinks all the same, rather wanting to bang her head against the table at the compliments. Yes, because what she truly needs right now is to look particularly lovely. "For this evening, however, I think I will do a bit of retreating--some peace and quiet might be better, all the same."

“Of course, of course. Should you need anything, you have but to ask.” It’s hard not to stare at Hakuei, as lovely as she is, as self-possessed and confident and intriguing as she is, and Sinbad isn’t sure he quite manages it. Ah, well, hopefully she’ll take it as flattering instead of lecherous. It is a compliment more than an invitation; utterly breathtaking though she is, Sinbad knows better than to trifle with foreign princesses, especially ones that so obviously have a secret lover as Hakuei. There are just certain responses it’s impossible to quell. “From my servants, or from me. Enjoy your stay, Princess, and enjoy your rest.”

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Ja'far is getting a little sick of all this traveling.

He's not one to complain, however, especially when a Kou princess literally drops herself on their doorstep. That needs to be remedied--and quickly--and so he leaves not a day later, after politely insisting Hakuei write a letter in her own hand, which she is all too eager to do.

For all the irritation of getting past Magnoshutatt's defenses, Kou is a dozen times worse. Ja'far swears that after this particular maneuver, he will take a week off (he won't, he knows he won't), but at least there is enough interesting news on the road, and enough thoughts forged in his mind as to better plant seeds for Sindria's victory should war further encroach upon them.

It will be interesting, at least, to finally meet so much of the Kou Empire's royal family.

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This is bad.

Kouha knows it is, when they receive a firm, flat missive from Kouen to return home at once. It's even worse, when they arrive and the courts are buzzing and chaotic, making Kouha all the more nervous about attending and keeping a cool head when it comes to Gyokuen. Kouen is tight-lipped and ashen, his temper so foul that even Judal steers far, far away from him, and it isn't until later that
evening that he hears news of why.

Nearly all of Hakuei's army destroyed, a sparse few men washing ashore just south of Kou's borders—among them, her most trusted servant, who had personally returned to deliver the news of her death.

Kouha wants to be the optimist, to open his mouth and insist that maybe she isn't dead, but the look on Kouen's face makes it clear that he isn't up for any thin threads of hope. It makes dread twist low in Kouha's belly, thinking all too vividly of what if it were me in this same situation, and Koumei had been the one to die.

He'd probably look as stricken as En is trying not to be.

It's for Kouen's sake that he bites his tongue during the war council, no matter how Gyokuen's simpering is enough to drive him mad. He's granted another army--something he dearly wants, but under these circumstances, it's a sort of bitterly grim determination rather than any one that screams eager for victory.

That should be the end of it. He should set out tomorrow without any kinks in the road. It's suspected that it's magicians from Magnoshutatt, anyway, that murdered her, though Kouha thinks rather differently, from the gleam in his step-mother's eye.

Nothing is ever the end of it, though.

The doors creak open, and Kouha blinks, lifting his head from where it has sunk into one hand at the sight that is suddenly several paces farther into the room. Clad all in white, save for a cloak that looks more the color of sand, the man--at least, he thinks it's a man, it's a little hard to tell when all he can see of their face is their eyes, sharp and dark, peering out from the opening of their shemagh--bows low, and it looks as if there is a scroll held in one of his hands.

"I come with a message for Prince Kouen."

Not even an apology for the interruption. Ah, this will be good.

A dozen men move at once, generals instinctively grabbing for weapons they never bring into the war council and turning on the stranger with bare hands instead, leaping--
“Stop.”

Kouen’s voice isn’t loud, more curious, but it’s a command all the same, and the men slink back to their positions. “Who are you?”

“I think I should ask the questions here, don’t you, my son?” Gyokuen purrs, standing from her chair in a slow slink of a movement. Kouen watches her, Koumei can see with a sidelong glance, though he himself doesn’t take his eyes off the stranger. There’s something…secret, about him. Something hidden, that no questioning will bring out. At least, Koumei thinks so.

A lash of magic leaps out, curling around the stranger’s waist and yanking him close, and Gyokuen opens a hand palm-out. “Any message you have can come through the Empress, my dear boy.”

The magic doesn't even make the messenger flinch, which is entertaining in and of itself, even though Kouha wants to hiss like a cat at the witch on Kouen's behalf. There isn't a flicker of reaction in the man's face when he simply deposits the scroll into Gyokuen's hand without blinking. "Of course, Your Grace."

_Surprisingly, Sindria's king is decent company._

- _E._

A dark cloud rages over Gyokuen’s face, but only for a moment, and then it clears to be replaced by simpering sweetness. “How very….fortunate, my son,” she coos, letting the missive fall into Kouen’s hand, stroking a finger down his shoulder. “It seems your dear sister managed to escape her sinking ship after all.”

Koumei wonders if he’ll ever learn the kind of self-control Kouen has, to hardly blink at that, to hardly twitch even after he’s been out of his mind for the better part of a week. “I see,” he says calmly. “Mother, release the messenger. I would have words with him.”

“Ask me nicely.”

Koumei takes it back. Kouen doesn’t have nearly the self-control he’d thought, a muscle twitching in
his jaw at that. “Please release him.”

“Anything for you, my sweet boy.”

The magical lash vanishes, and Gyokuen nods her head, her advisors standing to follow her out of the room. At a nod from Kouen, his own men leave as well, leaving the brothers alone with the strange, pale man.

“Thank you,” Kouen says, and now his hand clutches the missive tightly in his fist as he bows to the small man. “I know not how you’ve made the journey, but you will be rewarded for your efforts.”

Kouha barely remembers not to stare so obviously. En really has it bad for Hakuei, if he's bowing to a messenger, no matter how important his cargo.

"That is hardly necessary, Your Majesty." The man's head bows. "I do have another message to relay you, if you think you can hear it." Are the walls listening? is all but on his tongue.

Kouen waves a hand. “There will be time for such things later. I take it you are hardly just some messenger, not with that level of skill in infiltration. It would be crude of me not to give you quarters for the night. Koumei.”

“Yes, Highness.”

“Show our guest to his rooms.”

Koumei lets his power fall gently on the man, the true meaning of the way Kouen had said his name, even as he bows to his brother. “Yes, Highness.” To the stranger, he says, “If you would follow me?”

Kouha takes that as an invitation.

A hasty bow to Kouen, and he immediately trails after Koumei. No way in hell the man isn't armed, and even if he's brought a message saying Hakuei's alive, they still don't know who he is. "Long trip?" he casually asks.
Not even a damned blink. "Hardly more than usual, Your Highness."

This isn't very fun. "And people say you're boring, Mei," he mutters.

Koumei gives his brother a sly little smile and a wink, leading the man up a set of stairs (ugh, stairs) and pausing a moment on the landing to catch his breath. "My apologies," he mutters, hand pressing against his stomach. "I have recently been indisposed, physical activity is still something of a strain." And if this tool of Sindria thinks he is a wilting flower for it, well, Kouen likes it when they're underestimated. Also, it hurts.

Kouha wants to tell his brother that he can't be a damned bodyguard and carry him at the same time, but that would probably not go over well. "Told you you shouldn't be up and around," he mutters, sighing hard. "I'll carry you I guess--"

"Heeey, is it true? Is Hakuei actually alive?"

Kouha doesn't notice the stiffening of the messenger's shoulders. It's a little difficult to, when suddenly there is a Magi all but coiled around his head. "Hi, Judal," he deadpans. "Yeah, she is. Why don't you go talk to En about it?"

"He's in a mood. Damn, if she can haul herself out of a shipwreck--" Suddenly, abruptly, Judal pauses, his gaze flickering to their guest. "… What's Freckles doing here?"

"Freckles?" Huh. Weird nickname. "Wait, you know him?"

"Yeeeh, kinda hard to mistake that rukh." Judal's smile turns decidedly wicked as his feet actually hit the floor, and he leers close, reaching up to grab for the man's shemagh and pull it from his face. "Demoted after I wiped the floor with you the last time we met up?"

The man is surprisingly fast in smacking Judal's hand away. "Merely following orders."

Now, this is interesting. This is more life than Koumei’s seen from their visitor yet, and it makes the thought of the pain in his stomach vanish from Koumei’s mind. “I’ve been terribly rude,” he murmurs, tugging on Judal’s braid and winding it slowly around his fingers. Judal usually listens to
him, at least when he’s not showing off for Kouen, probably because of all the times Koumei had indulged his games when he was young. “Do you know, Judal, we don’t even know our guest’s name?”

"Oh," Judal sighs, leaning himself back into the tug with a grin. "He's been shy, then? That's funny. He's--"

"Ja'far," is the flat interruption, and the cloth wrapped about his face falls away with a pull of his own hand. "A member of Sindria's parliament, and a messenger, as my king sees fit."

"… Freckles," Kouha distractedly murmurs, his head tilting to the side as he understands the nickname at last. Sort of odd-pretty. He could get behind this. "Hmm."

"More like Sinbad's favorite pet snake," is the Magi's snort, clearly annoyed that his grand reveal was stolen from him.

_I have freckles_, Koumei thinks a little resentfully, watching Kouha’s eyes trace over the stranger’s face. Still, there’s something about this man that let him get into the council chamber of the Kou Empire itself, without anyone being the wiser that he was even in the country. That’s unusual, even for a spy. “We have snakes of our own here in Kou,” he murmurs, setting off up the stairs with another grimace. “No doubt his Highness will come by and speak to you at some point. These will be your quarters.” He holds the man’s eyes, a little disconcerted by the color of them. “Don’t wander off."

"I wouldn’t dream of it." A bow of his head that doesn't quite break their shared gaze, and Ja'far slips into the room. "Thank you, for your hospitality."

"… So you’re wasting your time," Judal dryly says as the door shuts, glancing to Koumei with his head cocked. "Doing that thing of yours. And stop wincing like you're gonna die, you make me look bad."

Koumei slumps onto Judal’s shoulder. He’d rather slump onto Kouha, but that kind of thing just isn’t possible when they’re both standing. “Don’t like stairs,” he mutters. He hadn’t liked them much before his wound, and certainly doesn’t favor them any more strongly now. “And why is it a waste of time? There’s some power in him, I can feel it draining."

"Ahh, come on, Mei, I'll carry you up the last flight," Kouha sighs, grabbing for his brother’s arm.
"I'm supposed to be the cute one, you know…"

Judal brushes at his shoulder with a snort. "Because," he says without batting an eye, folding his legs up underneath himself as he immediately floats off the ground again, "he doesn't need it to kill you. Seriously, don't waste your time."

Koumei shrugs. En had told him to use his power, and that's really all the direction he needs. He can feel how much magoi the man has as it drains, certainly enough to capture a dungeon, though he doesn't *think* he's a dungeon capturer, and no matter what Judal says, he'll certainly be easier to deal with minus all of that.

He leans happily on Kouha's shoulder, glad for a moment for his infirmity that makes it easier for them to be so close. "I don't like him. He's shifty."

"Pretty, though," Kouha muses, and in one, easy movement, hefts his brother into his arms, the only real difficulty being his own height and trying to keep Koumei's robes out of the way.

Judal sniffs. "He's not pretty. Why does everyone say he's pretty? Pale and freckly and weird. En should just kill him, that'd be better."

"Nothing wrong with freckles," Koumei mutters. Already he's dead sure he doesn't like Ja'far of Sindria—and who in Sindria looks like that, anyway? He tucks his head into Kouha's shoulder, arms around his neck. "Who knows, maybe En will be smart and take that advice." He doesn't believe it, and even his voice is devoid of hope.

"No, he'll keep him alive, everyone always fucking keeps him alive," Judal irritably mutters before already starting to flit away. "You two lovebirds have fun, I'm gonna go try and talk some sense into him."

"… Touchyyy," Kouha murmurs, eyebrows lifted in amusement as he makes his way up the stairs. "Guess that one sidles up on his boyfriend one too many times. Pretty weird, though, that he managed to get in without anyone noticing. Makes me think of those Sarmen assassins they sent to clean up some things a few years ago."

"Definitely one of them. Did you see the way he moved?" The last thing Koumei wants is for Kouha to get involved with this, not when he's just gotten his army back. "I hope En doesn't change his mind about sending you out now. Even if he was just doing it because he thought Hakuei was dead,
"Really fast," Kouha agrees, thinking to how easily Judal's hand had been brushed aside, never mind the uncanny ability the man seemed to have to just blend in with their palace walls. "And if he changes his mind..." His mouth twists in irritation, trying not to think about that as he reaches the top of the stairs, shifting to carefully let his brother down onto his feet. "He probably won't. He's still pretty wound up, and Hakuei did still lose her own army."

Koumei starts to say something, then stops. Kouha doesn’t need to hear all his musings. They’ll probably just mess him up, make him paranoid, and he already knows enough to be wary of Gyokuen. “Let’s hope. You’ll be careful out there, right?” He climbs down to his feet, one hand still resting on the back of Kouha’s neck. “This is the second army we’ve lost because of....let’s call it surprise.” And you know what I mean.

Kouha sighs at that, and turns his head to butt his face against Koumei's shoulder. "I'll move so fast there won't be anything to take by surprise," he cheerfully replies. "You don't have anything to worry about, Mei. Well, except getting yourself back into shape again. You should harass Judal to fix you up better if you're still hurting."

“I just don’t like stairs,” Koumei admits, straightening without a hint of pain. “I have paperwork to do tonight. Meet you after dinner?”

"Lazy slut," is the affectionate retort, complete with a gentle shove to his shoulder. "Yeah. See you after dinner, Mei."

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Ja’far can move without anyone seeing him. That’s interesting. Koumei knows that trick too, though the idea of sneaking into an enemy stronghold to deliver a message doesn’t appeal to him at all.

Instead he drifts down the stairs, takes up a position where he can see the guest’s room, and waits. Servants pass by close enough that their robes brush against his. A guard walks in, sweeps the room with beady eyes, and walks out. No one blinks in his direction.

Not even Kouen, looking sidelong around the room before knocking on the guest’s door.
En, what do you think you’re doing?

Only a moment passes before the door opens, Ja'far's face impassive save for the slow lift of his eyebrows. His cloak has been set aside, and his face remains uncovered--little point, courtesy of Judal's interference--and he takes a step back with a deep bow. "Your Majesty. I thank you again for your hospitality."

Kouen enters the room, noting that nothing has been disturbed, a tactic that seems par for the course for this man. "I know who you are," he says without preamble. "You're the one Judal hates so much, Sinbad's advisor who's always at his side, aren't you? I had thought you….ill-suited to a mission like this. I'll have to revise my opinion."

"Judal is quite talkative," Ja'far deadpans, shutting the door behind him. "My name is Ja'far, and yes, I am normally a parliamentary official of King Sinbad's. After the reception of our first messenger was less than amicable, I decided it would be best if I go. Perhaps my position aided me into making the trip into your country."

Kouen stares the man down, then lets a little smile curl his lips. "No doubt it was your position," he agrees easily. "And now that we are quite alone, and quiet alone, tell me of Hakuei."

"She is alive and well, Your Highness," Ja'far readily supplies, meeting Kouen's gaze without hesitation. "You'll find Sindria to be most hospitable even at the worst of times. She is a guest of honor at our King's table, though she eagerly awaits a chance to return home."

And doubtless going to chastise me about what reception a Sindrian general would find in Kou, Kouen thinks, a bit fondly. "Will your king permit me to send an escort to fetch her? What ransom does he demand?"

"He would--and there is none," is the simple response to follow. "He only wishes for her safe journey home."

Kouen’s eyes narrow. “And what game is he playing, then? Be wary of lying to me, clerk. To have this sort of fortune fall in his lap, you’re telling me Sinbad of the Seven Seas will take no advantage?"

Ja'far's head tilts. "I am only relaying what my king has said, Your Highness. I do know that Sindria wants no war with Kou. I can hardly claim to read my king's mind, but perhaps this is something of a
“He offers peace? After my Magi offered war, he offers peace?” Kouen folds his arms, eyes narrowed. “Do you think your king is weak? Or merely ill-advised?”

A shrug follows that. "His armies hardly have the breadth of numbers that yours do, my lord. At best, I would call it attempting to be conservative of his life."

“Were I your king,” Kouen says mildly, “I’d have your tongue cut out for such disloyalty. You make him sound a great coward.”

Kouen makes it a little too easy.

Ja'far's lips curve into a slow smile. "I daresay he has far greater disloyalties to worry about than that, Your Highness. As I said earlier, there are other messages I bring to you, should you listen."

Kouen decides right then and there that he wants an advisor like Ja’far. An unseen man, who can read his king’s mind and will and speak easily with foreign dignitaries--yes, he wants that very much. “Give me your messages. And I’ll give you an offer when you finish.”

"The cause of Lady Hakuei’s defeat in Balbadd was not her own movements. Magicians within our own ranks were sent to stop her, along with a personal fleet." 'Our' very strongly implies everything but Sindria. "The orders were less to destroy her than they were to break her." Ja'far's eyebrows lift. "Believe it or not, my lord, but there are many of us about as fond of the witch in your capital as you are."

Oh yes.

Kouen wants someone like Ja'far very much.

He looks into dark snake’s eyes, one eyebrow raising even as he churns within, words of no no no no NO so close to his lips that he has to swallow his breath before he can speak sanely. “When Lady Hakuei came to your shores,” he says quietly, making it very clear that not only Ja’far’s continued vitality, but the very fate of Sindria and Al-Sarmen together depend on the answer, “what was her condition?”
Unfaltering, Ja'far holds Kouen's gaze. If he had any doubts about the nature of Kouen and Hakuei's relationship up until now, it's safe to say they've flown entirely out the window. "I assure you she was quite well. Perhaps surprisingly well, after such an ordeal. Perhaps your Magi put himself to good use and his blessing carried with her."

And perhaps my Magi also learned the art of potato farming in his spare time, one is as likely as the other. "Perhaps. What does he pay you, your king of Sindria? My coffers are more expansive. The constant revelry of such a place must be grating to a man such as yourself."

Ja'far almost has to question whether or not this is a big joke or not, for all the ease of it. Sinbad will have a good laugh later, for sure. "I do believe 'grating' is an understatement, my lord," he dryly retorts, eyes lidding. "One thing King Sinbad is capable of is paying well, though I do not doubt your own ability to outmatch him."

"The offer is genuine. Think on it, ere you return to your king." Kouen’s lips press together, and he strokes his beard slowly. "Or whoever you serve this week. I would hear more about this unrest."

"Should you allow a Sindrian messenger on occasion, I would be able to keep you quite a bit more… updated."

Oh yes, this one is very good. "Perhaps. I will consider the matter thoroughly before your departure. But tell me now, what you know of her movements." The tone of his voice makes the her he refers to quite clear, if the set of his jaw did not.

If this is the most troublesome part of the conversation, then he certainly has little to worry about for the future. "Prior to now, she assumed Lady Hakuei was dead. There were thoughts that she would turn to your youngest brother next, though now, I daresay her plans could be changing. I will be vigilant, of course, when I return to Sindria, to make sure nothing happens to the princess."

"Know this, man of many allegiances," Kouen says quietly. "If you should cause--nay, if any harm whatsoever befalls the princess before my eyes lay on her again, no place on this earth will be safe for you. No country, no loyalty, no friends will protect you or your king or anyone you’ve smiled at in the street. Do I make myself clear?"

Ja'far merely smiles, a deep bow preluding his response. "Very clear, Your Highness. Your princess is in very safe hands, rest assured."
“Good. See that she stays there until she’s in mine.” He folds his arms, staring down at the small man. “You have but to name your price, to make this accommodation permanent.”

"Forgive me if I am so bold for saying this, my lord," Ja'far slowly says as he straightens, "but I would already consider this arrangement permanent, if it is to your taste. Sindria's king may not see the need for war as you do, but that is not to say he does not have a number of plans that you may find whispered into your ear in the future."

Kouen bows his head. “Then no doubt I’ll see you soon.” He moves to the door, hesitating. “Table is set at sundown. You will have a place set for you. If you have any allergies, tell a servant and alert the kitchen.”

That's an entirely different level of trust that Ja'far didn't quite expect. "I'm honored, my lord. Thank you again for your hospitality--ah, though," he lightly adds, "I do apologize if I have offended Prince Koumei in any way. That precaution of his, draining my magoi? I am indeed lightheaded, you can tell him as much if it will assuage any of his worries."

Kouen’s eyes narrow. He might just be too good, this one, and that does little to make him covet the man any less as an addition to his coterie. “I’m sure he’ll be relieved,” he manages, before he leaves the room.

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Five years earlier

Koumei's door is rarely locked, usually already open, and Judal remembers that well.

Kouen leaves, thankfully--as quickly as he can as a matter of fact, and that's Judal's one comfort as he slowly drags himself from bed, making a beeline, first and foremost, for a hot bath that he sinks down into until he wonders if he might drown.

Nothing like Sinbad. En is nothing like Sinbad with this sort of thing, and thinking about that makes him shake all over again, shivering no matter the steaming hot water turning his skin pink over purpling bruises. It could have been fun, if Kouen would have just kissed him once or twice, or even if he'd just told him that he looked nice even with his face down into the bed like that--
Judal hurriedly wraps himself up into a heavy robe, hair still trailing and damp when he thinks of Koumei’s room, always with low light and smelling of ink and parchment—at least a dozen times more comforting than his own chambers at the moment, if only because he won't have to be alone.

Koumei’s lap already has a scroll in it, and that's troublesome. He tries to be unobtrusive (even though he normally doesn't) as he slinks into the room, flops down next to him, and slowly crawls his way closer, trying to nudge his way into the man's lap. He tries a bit more not to let his eyes start watering just because there is a warm body but that, among all things, is far easier said than done.

It takes Koumei several moments to notice that he’s not alone in the room, usually does whenever he’s really engrossed in his reading, and he sets the scroll on the desk easily enough, reaching down to heft Judal up into his lap. “Oof, you’ve gotten heavier,” he teases, tugging on the end of Judal’s braid. “Did Xia kick you out of the kitchens again? I’ve got a sweet here somewhere.”

Judal's head slowly shakes, and he buries his face down into the crook of Koumei's neck, shivering as he huddles against the man's chest. Much different than Kouen, and that's good right now. Koumei is nowhere near as broad or even as comfortable to lie against, but he's still pretty warm, and his hands are never… like Kouen's were. "Not hungry."

That’s...troubling. Koumei doesn’t remember the last time Judal said he wasn’t hungry, or if there even was a last time. Especially since Judal had snuck out last week, and he’d gotten wind that some of Kouen and Father’s new friends had been less than pleased.

He stays quiet, stroking Judal’s back, the way he does sometimes after Kouha’s earned himself a striping with the birch and can’t bear to sit anywhere but on his lap. That hasn’t been common for years, but it’s hardly the first time a child has fallen asleep on his chest, and he picks up the scroll, reading silently over Judal’s shoulder for the time being.

It doesn't take long for his shivering to turn to sniffling to turn to crying, not when Koumei's hands are so nice.

Judal doesn’t mean to start crying again. Kouen obviously hates it, so he should probably try and stop—but that particular thought just makes him cry harder, little sobs choked in his throat and making his chest heave as he tries to curl into a ball and hide. "S-sorry," he whispers. "Sorry, I'll stop, I--just give me a s-sec, don't be mad--"

“It’s fine,” Koumei murmurs, hand not pausing in stroking up and down his back. “It’s fine, don’t
worry, I don’t care if you get my robes wet.” He sets down his scroll, pulling out a handkerchief and wiping Judal’s cheeks, then dabbing it on the end of his nose. “I got these when my mother died,” he says quietly, trying to distract Judal at least a little. “They thought we were going to cry for ages, I think, so they gave us about a hundred silk handkerchiefs each. You can have this one, if you want.”

Judal’s head shakes again, his eyes watering up even further. "En… h-he got mad when I started crying… so I should probably j-just learn not to."

Koumei frowns, and tucks Judal’s head in against his shoulder. “There, now I can’t see whether you’re crying or not, so it doesn’t matter.” En, what did you do to him? What did they tell you to do? Judal is sort of shifting on his lap like he’d had a hiding, but something about it bothers him still.

That makes him shudder, but he huddles closer all the same, his hands lifting to cling to the front of Koumei’s robes. "I don't get it," he whispers, sniffing hard. "I… I didn't even think he liked me like that, but it didn't seem like he was having fun, either… I don't think I did anything wrong, though."

The furrow in Judal's brow deepens and he shoves his face harder down into Koumei's shoulder. Troubling, and confusing. Koumei wraps an arm tight around him, the way he’d done when Judal had had a nightmare and En’s bed had been off-limits, because there was a girl cuddled up to him or because he was too busy planning. “What did En do that made you cry?” It’s no secret that En hates dealing with crying children, half the reason Koumei had wound up chasing reluctantly around after Ha and Gyoku and Judal for years. “Did you get a beating?”

Judal doesn't lift his head up enough for it to properly shake. "Not… not really.” He bites his lip. "I think… they told him about when I snuck out, or something. He… maybe he was jealous."

That sounds like En, for sure. “He does get jealous easily,” Koumei murmurs, “you know that. It’s why I let you play with my toys instead of his, right? Hey, you didn’t tell me where you went, when you snuck out.”

"… There's another guy--he's conquered so many dungeons, more than En even, and some of them were mine and I just… I wanted to meet him, so I went." Judal huffs through his nose. "I didn't expect everyone to get so mad. And… I always thought En liked Ei, not me, so why would he get mad about that?"

“En does like Ei, they used to be betrothed. What does that have to do with anything? This guy… his name is Sinbad, right? You’ve heard of him,” he points out, grabbing on his desk for a map, tracing Sindria with a finger. “See, this is where he lives, he’s the king. And this is where we are, up here.”
Judal sniffs, pulling back enough to wipe at his nose as he spares a bleary-eyed glance at the map. "Y-yeah, I know. For a king, he's a lot different than your dad. A lot more handsome, for one. Ahh, and… he's really nice, and he made everything feel really good--but En just…" Judal frowns, glancing down at his wrists, the bruises there, and pulls at the sleeves of his robes to cover them.

Koumei’s eyes track down, stomach twisting as he sees the bruises on Judal’s wrists. They aren’t so different from the ones on his own wrists even now, the reason he’s so careful to bind his sleeves down, but he’s never cried like this after. “Judal,” he says, keeping his tone even, “did you go to bed with this king? It’s all right if you did, I won’t be mad.”

A slow, worried nod follows. "I didn't think they'd get so upset about it. I was just having fun, why aren't I allowed to?"

Ah, that makes a little more sense. “That king isn’t friendly to Kou, we’re probably going to go to war with him sometime. They just don’t want you to get attached. There’s plenty of fun you can have in Kou, you know.” He reaches down, brushing a thumb along one bruise. “Did that king give you these?”

"… No." Judal pulls his hands away, shoving his sleeves down again as his eyes slide to the side. "En did." His lower lip trembles. "If that's what 'fun' is supposed to be like in Kou, I don't… I don't want to do it again."

Oh.

Koumei swallows, patting Judal’s arms. He wants to say that Judal won’t have to do it again, but that’s got nothing to do with him, not really. Kouen wouldn’t listen if he said anything, and Al-Sarmen probably wouldn’t even bother to laugh at him. “You want to spend the night in my room tonight?” he asks instead, giving Judal’s round cheeks another dab with his kerchief. “I can bring Ha in and we can play that scarf and ring game you’re so good at, and have candy as prizes. Or I can read you a story.”

Judal manages a little nod. "If… if you think En won't be mad at me, for staying." He'd almost brave that, though, rather than go back to his own bed right about then.

“I’m sure he won’t mind.” After En hurts someone, he likes to be alone, until he doesn’t, and even then it’s a slave he’ll go to, or a woman in town to lay his head on her breast and have his own hair petted. Koumei wriggles out of the chair, settling onto the bed and pulling the covers off, tucking
them around the two of them as he reaches for his books. “Hmm, how about the Old Man and the Pretty Witch? Or Lucky Little Ali, you like that one.”

“… Either's fine.” Judal buries his face back down into Koumei's chest, huddling underneath the sheets until he's all but a pair of eyes poking out. This, at least, is a lot better than Kouen's bed, than his bed, and he tries not to think about how he was pretty sure Kouen used to like him, at least a little bit.

Koumei reads, watching Judal retreat more and more until he’s a slightly less shivery lump on top of him. Odd, how Kouha is so much less of a child, how he was less of a child when he was twelve than Judal is now, huddled and terrified of the monster his idol had become. More like had always been, but to people who don’t matter, Koumei has to admit, and it annoys him that En had behaved this way towards someone he’d made Koumei take care of, care about. “Do you want some wine in your juice to help you sleep tonight?” he asks, closing the first book.

"Maybe just a little. Tastes bad.” He's already half asleep anyway, lulled by the sound of Koumei's voice. Judal unwinds from his huddle, just a bit, to nestle himself closer and more comfortably. "Bony," is his sleepy complaint.

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.” Koumei reaches for the bottle of wine, uncorking it and bringing it to his nose to sniff. Yep, still good even though it’s been at least a week since he’s opened it, when he’d gotten so bruised up in the city he’d needed it to soothe the aches before he could sleep. He tips a bit into a cup of peach juice, handing it to the child. “Here, it’ll make the hurts nice and fuzzy. And if that doesn’t work, I have opium.”

Judal wrinkles his nose a bit as he takes the cup. "That stuff gives me headaches, makes me have weird dreams," he mumbles before he drinks. "I'd rather hurt."

“Me too. It’s just for emergencies.” Koumei tugs his braid again, raising an eyebrow. “No big hurts that need bandages or anything, right? Good night’s sleep should fix you up plenty.”

"Just bruises.” In weird places, Judal mentally adds, reaching over Koumei to set the cup down before flopping back against his side. "Never getting up. Sleeping forever."

“Fine by me. At least the mattresses are more comfortable than I am.” I just hope you sleep long enough for me to have a little talk with Kouen.
Koumei can’t help but remember the first time he’d comforted Judal after Kouen’s rough treatment, and he’d slipped wine into his peach juice to help him sleep. Now he has a bottle of peach wine, and fortunately Judal seems just as disinclined to seek out the rest of his family as he does. “I don’t know why they think he’s so great,” he grumbles, taking a swig right from the bottle, laying on his back with his head lolling off the bed. “He’s no good at anything. He’s not handsome. He’s just...dammit, it’s dumb. Dumb. I don’t....you know I never wanted to be the Emperor?”

"Never would've guessed," Judal drawls, flopping similarly onto the bed, his long braid tumbling over the side. "He's fucking awful, isn't he? Literal snake in the grass. He's not even pretty, why does everyone say that?"

“I don’t know.” Koumei wishes he’d let his hair hang over the side, it’s all tangled up around him, and damn it, this is why he doesn’t do things. “I didn’t wanna be Emperor. I didn’t want...general either. No. Or a magician. I just wanted....to be a little useful, and read books, and be able to watch stuff, and be a guy no one noticed. And....what the hell? He’s trying to do my job and everyone loves him for it.” He scowls, taking another swig of wine. “If I hear someone talk about how cute his freckles are again I’m gonna....”

"That's what snakes do, they take things." The Magi rolls onto his stomach, grabbing at the wine bottle to steal a drink of his own. "He's Sinbad's whore, you know," Judal casually confides, chin propped in one hand as he slowly kicks his feet back and forth. "But Sinbad makes faces at him. He never makes faces at me, it makes me so mad. Ja'far's just a creepy little snake."

“I bet he’s a terrible whore,” Koumei grumbles. “I bet he doesn’t even know what he’s doing, stuffed up little--I mean, stuck up little bastard. Even Kouha thinks he’s pretty and En thinks he’s interesting and I put poison in his wine and he didn’t even flinch and that’s annoying.”

"He's an assassin, he's not gonna flinch at stuff like that, Mei," Judal sighs, lidding his eyes as he passes the wine bottle back. "I've fought him, though--he's not that good. So En'll get bored after awhile and Ha thinks everyone is pretty, you don't have to worry about it."

“You fought him?” Koumei rolls onto his side, trapping his hair underneath himself, then rolls back the other way to get it free, grabbing the bottle and taking another swig. Probably enough, the room is starting to blur around the edges, but he’s not drunk. He’s not. “Why didn’t you kill him?”
"I was there for other reasons, usually, and then Sinbad would interrupt…” He trails off, flopping his head forward and down into the bed again. "And he's really good-looking and I like staring…”

“I saw him once. Handsome guy. I don’t know why En hates him so much, he seems like he has fun.” Koumei’s eyes narrow. “But if he hangs out with that….that stupid….ugh, I hate that guy.”

"I wanna go have fun with him right now," Judal bemoans, rolling over onto his back. "Let's just kick Ja'far out and go have fun. Or… whatever it is you do. You don't move much."

“I have fun. Moving isn’t always fun. Fun isn’t always moving. I don’t know why people put them together so much.” Koumei rolls on top of Judal, tugging his braid. “You have bruises. You don’t come to me anymore when En gets mean with you.”

"Don't lay on them, you're bony and poking me," Judal complains, though makes no real attempt to shove Koumei off as his arms flop over the side of the bed in turn. "Don't bring that up, that's gross. He's fun enough nowadays, even if he never makes faces at me, either. No one's ever gonna make faces at me."

“Maybe they make them when you’re not looking.” That’s what he does with Kouha, though he suspects it doesn’t have the desired effect of not letting his little brother get too attached. “Besides, you’re really young. And you're a magi, if you want me off you can float me, I hate moving.”

"No, they just don't make them. I know. And I'm not that young, Kouha's younger than me and he makes faces at you and you make faces at him and if you weren't weird, creepy brothers you'd get married or something. Everyone in this family is fucking one another, anyway, what's it matter."

Koumei stares down at the blurry Magi. “You can’t say things like that, Judal. You’re gonna get Ha in trouble.”

Judal turns his head to stare back. "I don't say it in public, geez."

“The witch has ears everywhere. Who’s she come after, huh? Ha and Ei. The ones who--look, you know she’s after En and me, everyone knows. I mean, obviously En is the important one, but I’m the backup, everyone knows that, even my name means younger sibling.” Also plum, but that’s not the point.
"I'm not--okay, I'm dumb, but I'm not that dumb, there's no one listening in here, I checked." A shove, and Judal rolls Koumei off of him as he twists onto his side. "You aren't the backup, Ha is. You'd be a shitty emperor. I like both of you so don't worry about it, neither of you are dying--if I'm around, at any rate."

“I’m the safety.” Koumei twists around, untangling his hair and letting it fall over the side of the bed to pool on the floor. “I’d probably hold the throne for Ha. I’d sit there and be acceptable and quiet and he’d run everything. Some people in Kou won’t follow him because of his mother.” He looks up, swallowing hard. “You’ll protect him too, right? He’s so brave but he’s so little and so young….and when he’s far away I get scared….”

"You're being gross." Judal flops around until his legs drape over Koumei’s lower back. "He's not that little. Still hurts. And he's old enough to swing a sword around, so he's fine. Don't worry though, I'll watch him or something. He's pretty good on his own, though, a lot smarter than En sometimes”

“He is, isn’t he?” Koumei asks fondly, a hand stroking up and down Judal’s back. There’s so much pride in him, pride of having such a strong, smart, capable little brother, pride of having helped raise him, pride in the way Kouha smiles, pride in every part of him that Koumei isn’t even supposed to know about, let alone love the way he does. “Hey, why don’t you just put En out of his misery and choose him already? Then you can really be part of the family. He’d probably let you marry Gyoku.”

Judal makes a face at that. "Who says I want to marry her? I'm not the prince charming she wants, anyway, she'd be miserable," he mutters, reaching around to swat Koumei’s hands away. "You're really drunk. I'll choose when I feel like it, I'm already subjected to all of you weird people all day."

“You don’t want to be a prince? It’s nice.” Koumei withdraws his hands, though he’s tipsy enough (nearly two glasses of wine, not that he’s measuring) to giggle at the slap, and the involuntary tingle it sends through his body. Too conditioned, to respond so easily. “I don’t care if you don’t marry her, but En’s shopping around for another husband for her. Probably way East,” he adds, musing as he stares at the ceiling. “Or maybe up North. Far away.”

"I'm a Magi, I'm better than any prince. And you're a damned lightweight," Judal grumbles, twisting to give Koumei a light shove. "If you're gonna be drunk, at least be a drunk worm or something. Enough talking about Gyoku, you're just gonna make me mad."

Koumei laughs, relishing the giddy feeling he so rarely feels unaccompanied by pain. “What the hell is a drunk worm? Do you want me to lick the wine off the floor or something?” Not the worst thing he’s ever licked off the floor.
"… You're really reaching tonight, when's the last time Ha slapped you around?" Judal snorts, even as he promptly starts wrapping Koumei up in a blanket. "No, see, like this. Roll yourself up tighter and you're a worm. No arms, no legs, no responsibilities. You get bonus points if you're drunk."

Koumei blinks slowly. “I like this,” he says, a smile spreading across his face. He tries rocking side to side, and hardly anything happens. That’s about the summation of his effort, and he lays happily facedown. “This is good, why haven’t we done this before?”

"Because the Kou Empire doesn't want to be the Worm Empire," Judal matter-of-factly answers, and moves to use Koumei as a pillow. "Worm pillows included."

“Beautiful. This is your own invention?” It certainly sounds like something Judal would come up with, back when they’d all taken turns coming up with activities to do together, and Koumei had been stumped for anything other than which book the children wanted to hear read to them again. Ha was always great at coming up with games, fortunately.

"Yeah. Worms are my own thing, I don't let just anyone come a worm, you know." Judal closes his eyes. "You're okay, though. You and Ha and En and a few others I guess. Good worms candidates."

“So I’m curious,” Koumei says slowly, eyes sliding shut as he rolls to the side, thumping lightly against Judal, “how long you’ve known about this dumb snake guy. How come you never said anything about him?”

"He's been around forever. Why's it matter?" Judal sighs, lightly shoving back. "He's creepy and annoying and dumb."

“I don’t know, we could have been ready for him,” Koumei mutters. “I hate surprises in the war council room, and he’s a bad surprise. You can just tell he thinks he’s a good spy. ” I'd be a great spy if I wanted to.

"Sooorrry, he’s so dumb I didn't think to bother. And you know now, so don't bitch at me about it." Judal rolls his eyes. "They'll get bored of him, just don't whine about it so much."

Koumei huffs. As many times as he’s played babysitter, distracting and entertaining Judal whenever he’d been upset or angry or sad, he’d think the Magi could return the favor once.
Actually no, he doesn’t think that. But it would be nice. “Doesn’t matter,” he grumbles. “I’m a worm anyway.”

"Yeah," the Magi agrees, butting his head back with a content sound. "A good worm. I don't let just anyone be a worm, so be happy about that, at least. Definitely no Ja'far worms."

Eh, it’s good enough. “He could tell I was draining him,” he says grumpily. “He basically told En it was cute. God, I want to punch him.”

"So punch him. I warned you about that, though."

“Okay, I don’t want to punch him,” Koumei admits. “But I’d like him dead. En won’t listen to me, though. I hate it when he doesn’t listen. I’m going to be very cross with him tomorrow.”

"… You mean you aren’t always kinda cross with him?" Judal rolls Koumei up a bit more to add more padding to his worm pillow.

“More so than usual, I mean. And really angry, not just the way my face sort of...is.” Koumei blinks at Judal. “Are you trying to fatten me up for a fancy supper?"

"If you were fat, I wouldn't have to add more worm padding. Too bony, not comfortable,” is the matter-of-fact response.

“Ha usually makes sure I eat, and he’s been...busy.” He’ll be busy again, now that En’s going to give him another army, which means he’ll be out being adventurous and doing very dangerous things, and Koumei will watch him as a piece on En’s chess board, moving around and wondering if that’s right, if he’s safe, if he’s coming home after all. “I forget.”

"You're bony anyways, but wow, you've got it bad. And you wonder why I say stuff about it all the time."

“I don’t wonder why you say stuff, I know I’m bony.” Koumei lets out a long huff of a breath, remembering the way everyone’s eyes had followed the pale, freckled man, wondering why he’s jealous when he doesn’t want everyone’s eyes on him. “Do you think people tell that dumb guy that he’s boring and bony?”
"… Freckles is a lot of things, but he's not bony," Judal dryly points out, reaching a hand back to pull on Koumei's ponytail. "You've got a jealous streak as wide as En's, huh?"

“It’s never really come up before,” Koumei says with as close to a whine as he ever gets, though it turns into a pleased little sound at Judal’s hand pulling on his hair. “No one ever wants to take the ‘quiet boring guy’ job from me. Or the freckles. That’s nice, do it harder.”

"No, you'll get started and you're a lot of work. And yeah, well, be quiet and boring in better ways or something. I tooold you, he's a snake, doing shit like this is what he does.”

Koumei sinks down to the bed with an annoyed grumble. This is the worst night ever. “Do worms have the power to sleep until the problem goes away?”

"It's what I try to do when I'm a worm, at any rate." Judal heaves a long sigh. "It works. Sometimes.”

Koumei heaves a sigh of his own, and closes his eyes until the world stops swimming. “Worth a try.”
Chapter 8

The Kou Empire isn't exactly an exhausting infiltration, but the traveling certainly is.

Ja'far briefly wonders if he's getting too old for this (never mind that he's only 26). Bed, however—his bed, preferably, but that might be a long time in coming—seems especially pleasant right about then, and so Ja'far allows himself a final, sort of bored test of his abilities in scaling the wall of Sinbad's own palace, hauling himself up onto the balcony, and tsking a bit in disappointment at the appointed guards not noticing a thing.

"Eventually, I'll need to have a hand at our troops again myself," is his sigh of a 'greeting', and he yanks the covering from his face, shaking out his hair. "You didn't even get out of bed. Lazy."

"Why should I get out of bed when I can just get you into it?" Sinbad asks, mentally praising his own calm in not immediately jumping on Ja'far, though he does give in to the urge to grab his wrist and tug him down. "Tomorrow we can re-instate the red tag policy, everyone you paint a red tag on without their notice gets fined."

Ja'far laughs at that. "So there will be room in the budget this coming month for a very lavish festival, then," he says with a roll of his eyes, allowing himself to be dragged down as he sheds his cloak and kicks off his shoes. "I'm sunburnt, don't grab."

"How did you get sunburnt up North? I'm pretty sure they have roofs in Kou, and only your eyes are showing." He stretches out, reaching for the aloe instinctively and a soft-bristled brush. "Take everything off, I'll help."

"Because crossing deserts to avoid Gyokuen's army on the way back, that's why," Ja'far mutters, stripping in short order with an annoyed exhale. "I'm fairly certain she had a bulletin put out for me, too. I don't think she likes me, considering how much Kouen does."

"Oh, does he? I'll have to retract my opinion of his taste, in that case. I have to admit, I was unfairly biased about his taste because of his facial hair and the fact that he seems to think it looks good." He dips the brush into the gel, then slowly paints it across freckled pink shoulders, and over the back of his neck.

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A long, shivering sigh escapes, and Ja'far tips his head forward, letting Sinbad work. "The whole thing was pathetically easy, especially after I caught wind of exactly how divided Kou really is," he
murmurs, eyes lidding. "But first and foremost, did you know I'm getting paid right this moment to spy on you? Tell me something good, I'd love to hear it."

Sinbad bursts out laughing, dabbing more aloe onto the other shoulder, the worst of the spots. “I should have known they could tempt you with money, you miser. Something good...hmm, I’m sure it will interest your new masters to know that the Princess has been asking for a manned ship to carry her back to Kou without risking the land routes.”

"Excuse you, just because I'm good with my money and don't try to spend it on every shiny thing doesn't make me a miser," Ja'far sniffs. "That won't be necessary of her, of course; Kouen wants to send an escort to bring her home. If she takes to a ship right now, I daresay her own mother will sink it. She was the cause of Hakuei's defeat in Balbadd."

Sinbad refrains from pointing out that calling Ja'far a miser was intended for irony, enjoying too much the feeling of dragging soft bristles across Ja'far’s skin. “I thought as much, from what your men have reported. And she was the cause of the Red Scourge being stopped as well, wasn’t she? Give me your opinion, is she worth attempting to make an alliance with?”

"With Gyökuen? No, absolutely not, don't touch her with a ten foot pole. She's Al-Sarmen and reeks of it." Ja'far shuts his eyes, trying not to simply flop to one side. "The Ren family is far too easy to manipulate, besides--Kouen, in particular."

“Easy? One would think they’d be more skilled at picking up on manipulation by now, especially Kouen. Then again,” Sinbad adds practically, “the Kou Empire is hardly the juggernaut so many seem to think, not with how young it truly is. Are you sure he isn’t stringing you along?”

Ja'far turns his head to give Sinbad a put out stare. "He invited me to his dinner table."

Sinbad blinks. “You’re serious?”

"Very. He also offered me permanent accommodations within the palace, a salary far greater than what you pay, and a number of other things that made the Second Prince start grinding his teeth. He tried to poison my wine--also, his djinn's ability is to drain magoi, I figured this out when he tried to do as much to me. That was a good laugh."

Sinbad settles down onto his elbows, reaching out to touch Ja’far’s back with his hand, just to make sure he’s alive, make sure he’s still warm and vital and breathing, all the good things he likes in
Ja’far. “That sounds like a fairly useless djinn for combat, at least for surprise combat. Tell me about him, I only saw him once in passing on my visit. If you can keep your mind off of your dear master Kouen, that is.”

"Don't be disgusting," Ja'far sighs out, and he stretches out, face burying its way into one of Sinbad's pillows. "He's not very able-bodied, for one. I believe a good portion of it was an act, but he'd be easily bested all the same. I believe he operates as Kouen's advisor more than anything… oh, and he and the youngest prince are very… attached."

“The youngest prince--the Red Scourge, you mean? He is the one who’d gone through Magnoshuttat like a hot knife through butter?" That’s interesting, surely. It makes him rethink a few strategies. “Closer than brothers, I assume? Do you think they’d be easy to manipulate?”

"Yes, the Red Scourge… hardly what I expected, I'd love to see your reaction. He's as short as Yamu and built even tinier." Ja'far exhales a snort of amusement. "'Closer than brothers' is a bit of an understatement. Kouha complimented my looks, and Koumei looked as if he were about to stab me on the spot. Very easy to manipulate."

Sinbad starts to place a kiss to Ja’far’s cheek, notices how sunburnt it is, and dabs aloe on it instead. “You bring me such pretty things when you go on business trips. I suppose it’s worth the way I pine for you when you’re gone. What about the princesses?”

"Well, wife, most of them are either married off or in the process of being married off--except for Kougyoku, they're having some difficulty in finding her a husband. More notably," Ja'far says, "is the fact Hakuryuu wasn't there. They must have sent him elsewhere."

“Elsewhere? You didn’t find out?” Odd, for Ja’far to have left a loose end, but doubtless he had had plenty on his plate already. “I don’t suppose the second prince could have poisoned him as well?”

"No one seemed inclined to talk about him, not even his own mother. My guess is he's been misbehaving, though the implication is that he went quite far north." A sigh and he turns his cheek to press it into the pillow. "That whole family is bedding one another. Gyokuen tries to crawl into Kouen's lap at any moment, the two brothers, and last but not least, Kouen and Hakuei are definitely involved."

Sinbad’s eyebrows shoot up into his hair. “That’s…very interesting. Surely there’s something to be done about that, especially if they’re going to such lengths to keep it from the world but so careless about it around observant guests. Don’t rub aloe all over my sheets, you’ll stain them green.”
"Deal with it, I hurt. And I would say 'careless' was an understatement--the look on his face when I burst in and delivered her missive… small wonder he's so eager to woo me to his stronghold, honestly. Kouen is clearly in love with the woman. Have you managed to bed her, as I know you're dying to?"

Sinbad narrows his eyes. “I’ve told you before,” he says as a mild rebuke, "that I know when to bed a woman and when to leave her be. She’s not just the First Princess, but obviously in love with another, and most likely with child by him. I do have some self-control, whatever you might think.”

Ja'far snorts out a laugh. "Ah, yes, you are a shining example of self-control indeed. If she's pregnant, than that explains every single last one of Kouen's reactions and questions."

Sinbad shoots him a dirty look. “Well, then I’m glad I can solve your dilemma so easily. Talk to me of plans, what are their next moves? Who is Gyokuen really fighting, and what’s her endgame and strength? Did you see Judal?”

"Of course I saw Judal, he's the one who made me reveal my identity," Ja'far crossly replies. "Gyokuen is a powerful magician with the backing of Al-Sarmen as far as I can see… and I am fairly certain she just wants Kouen in her bed and his siblings--and apparently, her own children--out of the picture so she is the rightful empress. I'm not sure what she's planning to do next, but it probably will have something to do with Kouha." Worry briefly flickers over his face. "They're sending him back to Magnoshutatt, I seriously doubt he'll fail again at conquering it."

For a brief, odd moment, Sinbad thinks Ja’far is worried about Kouha. Then, everything makes sense. “I wouldn’t worry too much,” he says gently, giving an un-burnt part of him a reassuring squeeze. “Aladdin can take care of himself. And…” He sighs, rolling onto his back. “I’d go to their aid, but….they haven’t asked for it, they aren’t my ally, and I’m not sure I believe in what they’re fighting for.”

Ja'far opens his mouth to say a dozen different things about Aladdin and exactly what he's capable of and why that isn't the point--but shuts it instead, heaving a sigh. "They don't want your help. You're not a magician, therefore you are below them, anyway," he says with a roll of his eyes.

“I don’t refuse to help people just because they have a low opinion of me,” Sinbad says mildly. “But we have quite enough to worry about with the allies we do have. And Aladdin knows the skies of Sindria are always open to him.”
Never mind the dozens of other young magicians trapped in that country right about now. "At any rate, that's what you can expect. There's probably more I'm forgetting, but I'm tired and mostly want to get drunk and never leave this bed again. God, I hate sunburn."

Sinbad reaches under the bed, pulling out a jug of his favorite wine. "Glasses, or is this not that sort of an evening? I'll put aloe on you as much as you want, you know. This is the kind of painting I can do all day."

"To Sindria, where we marry people we aren't related to!"

"And to wine that isn't so sweet I want to rip my tongue out," Ja'far bemoans, stiffly pushing himself up onto his elbows to better take the jug and drink heavily from it. "Take a minute to imagine that child, though, the poor thing."

"Think it will come out with two heads? Or none at all? Ah, well, at least it has Hakuei’s genetics, probably gorgeous and stupid. The gorgeous he gets from her," he clarifies. "Or brilliant and ugly. The brilliant he'd get from her."

"Underestimating your enemies now, Sin?" Ja'far mildly chides, taking another, long drink before passing the jug back. "Kouen isn't stupid. He's... desperate, lovesick, probably dying to go back to the warfront as far as I can tell--definitely a bit out there, but not stupid."

"I wonder," Sinbad muses, "which would be more dangerous, Kouen with Hakuei at his side, or Kouen without Hakuei at his side? Either way, from what you've said, he isn't making unbiased decisions." He takes a long swig, feeling the pleasant burn in his belly. "Give me more vices, what weaknesses did you find? Beyond petty jealousies."

"Considering he threatened the welfare of our entire country if anything should happen to that woman... I'd say Kouen without Hakuei." Ja'far sighs, folding his arms to rest his head atop them. "You mean beyond the blatant incest, and the fact that Kouen clearly covets me already because he's been dying for a more mobile advisor for some time?"

"I know I'd be far more dangerous and unpredictable without you at my side," Sinbad says softly, finding an aloe-free spot to kiss--namely, Ja'far's hair. "You know, I think if somehow we could get Kouen out into the field, as ruthless as he is, that would be to our advantage, if his strategist is as frail as you say."

Ja'far's eyebrows lift. "I don't think you'll find a way to get to Koumei, if you're expecting him to follow Kouen onto the field. Talk at dinner had quite a bit to do with Kouha's trek to Magnoshutatt, and he wasn't going--no matter how he clearly wanted to." A sigh, and he stretches out an arm,
wriggling his fingers towards the wine jug. "You already are terribly unpredictable. That's why they
don't like you."

“That can’t be the only reason they don’t like me. It’s probably also because I’m more handsome and
charming.” Not-so-secretly, Sinbad is fairly convinced that’s why most people hate him. “And I
didn’t mean to go after Koumei, I meant that if Kouen is so used to relying on him and he’s far away,
that could be quite an advantage. Given that he’s so covetous of your skills, I mean.”

"Take a wife, if you are so charming." Ja'far downs another mouthful of wine. "Are you really so
certain you want Kouen out and about murdering things without someone to guide him from being a
total idiot about it? I don’t fancy the idea of advising him on how to lead a proper military campaign."

“To what degree do you think he takes advice?” Sinbad asks, stealing the bottle back before Ja’far’s
toally through. “Koutoko was a dangerous man in his own right, but not invincible. Do his children
resemble him, do you think? And what can we expect from Gyokuen?"

"I think," Ja'far slowly answers, "that right now, he's very open to anything that will steer him away
from Gyokuen's grasp. She will act on Kouha's movements, without a doubt... whether or not she is
successful this time is anyone's guess." He shifts, stretching with a grimace. "They're all dangerous in
their own way. Kouen has experience and power, even if he misses finer points; Koumei is an easy
kill, but he's sharp and knows their empire backwards and forwards; and Kouha is strong and
fearless, but he's young and a little too eager for glory. Not invincible, no."

“What’s the chance of the three of them fighting each other? You said two of them were
romantically...entangled,” Sinbad says with a grimace. “Do you think Kouen knows? If he
did...hmm, I don’t have any daughters of marriageable age, do I? It might be intriguing to offer a
princess to one of them and see what happens.”

Ja'far chokes on a laugh. "Oh, now you want princesses and princes to marry off. You are the most
incorrigible bastard I have ever met. Unfortunately, your eldest daughter is... 8? Turning 9?
Something along those lines. At any rate, no, they are far too close knit to start bickering amongst
themselves, and I can only imagine that Kouen knows very well what those two are up to. God, give
me more wine, I need to be more drunk for this."

Sinbad hands over the bottle, laughing. “Have as much as you like, there’s more if we finish it too
quickly. And I do suppose that’s far too young, even for what I’ve heard about Kou.” He frowns,
thinking. “I’ve got to have a few older, they must just not be in Sindria. Ah, well. It sounds as if
Gyokuen is the true wild card. She’s already wiped out two of their armies, not to mention what
she’s had done to her own daughter.”
"If you're serious, offer the girl under the condition the marriage isn't consummated for a few years." Ja'far twists to fairly wrap himself around the jug, taking a slower sip this time. "But yes, Gyokuen is the real issue. She wants to stay empress very badly, there's no doubt she will come after Hakuei again. That child she's carrying is the biggest threat of all to her status."

“A fool, to fear a child,” Sinbad says, forgoing the bottle and reaching under the bed for another. “This,” he says around a cork in his teeth, pulling it free, “is why primogenitor isn't the best method of choosing a king. It seems like pure ego, to think your own progeny must be so much better than anyone else who knows how to govern a country, don’t you think?”

"Well, generally, if they've received the most training, one would think they have a decent head start," Ja'far lightly debates. "If you think I'm going to wholly agree and stop telling you to take a wife, you're wrong."

Sinbad ignores that easily. “Training doesn’t count for anything, no one trained you how to run a country’s books, and I wouldn’t trade you for a man in this world. If you’d listen to my requests and change into a woman, you’d find me very willing to take a wife.”

"But I trained myself and read every other country's--you know what, never mind, I'm still not drunk enough for this." Ja'far promptly finishes off the wine jug and grabs for Sinbad. "Give it."

Sinbad raises an eyebrow, silently passing over the jug. “That long a journey, eh?” he asks, running an exploratory finger up the back of one long, pale leg. “Never fear, I’ll care for you, all you need.”

"That, and even more the fact that I dislike being eyeballed like I'm some sort of prized cattle," Ja'far snorts, his eyes slitting as he glances down to watch the slide of Sinbad's hand. "I'm getting too old for this."

="For my hands on you?" Sinbad asks, and the finger turns into two, sliding down a soft thigh. “Or for traveling? Either way, I’m disinclined to let you move from my bed, so it doesn’t matter much. You can’t get too old, I’m older.”

"For traveling," Ja'far allows, taking a deep draught from the bottle before letting his head loll back onto the pillow. Better judgement aside--he's tired and he's sunburnt, after all--he was the one that let himself into Sinbad’s room this time of night, and into his bed, besides. He supposes he sort of brought this one on himself. “Even if you're older, you don't look it. You just look more civilized, now that you have a better hairstyle.”
“What was wrong with my hairstyle before?” Sinbad demands, hand flying back to his hair and away from Ja’far’s leg. “I could still pull off that look.” To prove it, he pulls the tie free, twisting his hair up and off his neck.

"It was less the ponytail, more the… cowlick."

Sinbad scowls, batting at the piece of hair that just can’t seem to obey him, no matter what he does. “Well, that’s hardly different now.”

"It was longer before, and a lot more obnoxious." Ja'far's lips curve into a slow smirk. "You definitely looked the part of a wastrel."

“You liked it well enough, you loon,” Sinbad grumbles, letting his hair fall down loose around his shoulders. “You liked it enough to come follow me around for the next ten years.”

"You could have been bald and I would have still followed you." His eyes lid, and Ja'far reaches up to catch a strand of Sinbad's hair, gently tugging. "You're so vain. Having hair this long isn't a good idea."

Sinbad’s mouth spreads into a grin, and he leans forward to lay on his elbows, nuzzling behind Ja’far’s ear. “Why not? I keep it clean, and I rarely let my enemies close enough to pull it.”

"'Rarely', implying there are instances," Ja'far mildly retorts. "How many times have I used it as a handle when we're sparring, hmm?"

“But that doesn’t count!” Sinbad protests. “First, I never fight anyone as fast as you, because there isn’t anyone as fast as you. Second, I like it when you do that, so I let you.”

"That's defeating the purpose, you bastard," he growls, yanking on Sinbad's hair this time as he lurches up. "Try and be more responsible--ah… dizzy," Ja'far trails off as he promptly gives up, flopping back down with a huff.

Sinbad laughs, rolling into Ja’far’s tug and rolling down almost on top of him, catching himself on his forearms at the last minute. “I almost forgot your sunburn,” he murmurs, annoyed. “Damn, what will it be, three or four days before I can peel you like a tangerine?”
Ja'far's brow knits, a frown on his lips even as his arms lift nonetheless to drape around Sinbad's shoulders. "Why do you like to peel me so much? It's disgusting, it's all dead skin."

“Just another way to undress you,” Sinbad says with a grin, lowering down to brush his lips gently, no more than the swipe of a butterfly’s wing, over the other man’s lips. “Nothing about you is disgusting. Not your scars, not your dead skin, not the freckles you don’t understand are captivating to me.”

A soft, put-out exhale escapes, and Ja'far tilts his head up, lips parting as they press back against Sinbad's. "Do you try and wax poetic, or does it just happen naturally?"

“I thought you hated my poetry. You always try to edit it out of my books."

"It isn't poetry. It's purple prose and it's horrendous." Ja'far wriggles, grimacing as he tries to better settle and slide his legs around the other man's hips. "Might only be a day or two before you're peeling me, honestly."

“Mmm, I hope so, I always forget where I have to be careful of touching you.” The lips seem safe, and he doubts Ja’far was traversing the desert with his inner thighs on display no matter how attractive an image that presents. He lays down, resting all his weight on his forearms, kissing the man a little more deeply, trying to remember not to touch.

Ja'far supposes he can tolerate being on his sunburnt back for this.

A sigh, and his hands slide their way back through Sinbad's hair, fingers reflexively unwinding any tangles they snare into along the way. "It's mostly my back and upper arms," he wryly supplies, his eyes lidding as his teeth gently close against Sinbad's lower lip to tug. "And a bit of my face… I'll live, it's just… ah… uncomfortable."

Sinbad flips him over, laying back and running his hands down Ja’far’s thighs. “This should make it easier,” he says with a smile. “Be gentle with me, I’ve been a long time without you and I’ve missed you a great deal.”

Ja'far huffs down into the pillow he finds his face suddenly pressed back into, squirming at the slide of those big hands along sensitive skin. "Be gentle with you? Honestly, Sin, it's been less than two weeks this time.” Never mind that he's perhaps a little too obvious about missing his king in kind,
given it was his idea to show up in Sinbad's rooms, to drink, and generally collapse in his bed.

“Two weeks too long.” Never mind that he can go months, a year without touching Ja’far as long as he’s close, when they’re apart it feels like a hole in his side, a missing tooth that aches, a phantom limb. “Don’t do that anymore, will you? Too soon after Magnoshuttat.” He makes sure his hands stay low, which isn’t difficult as he fills them with firm, supple flesh, squeezing Ja’far’s ass. Then, he pauses. “But you must be tired. If you want to—if you don’t want to, that’s fine, I can wait until you’re well.”

It’s rather impossible not to wriggle underneath that touch, teeth sinking into his lower lip when the urge to arch his back makes his nerves prickle unpleasantly (and oddly pleasantly, too) all over again. "You say that as you're... ah... grabbing me, like one of your girls." There's no real irritation there, and Ja'far shivers as he half-buries his face back into the pillow. "I thought you were at least one to finish what you start."

That’s as close to permission as Sinbad needs, but he slows down anyway, pressing a kiss to Ja’far’s spine, then another on each vertebrae as he works his way down. “You don’t have to indulge me,” he murmurs. “You’re allowed to be human. And I don’t grab you like I grab them, I grab you special.” He steals a hand up, through Ja’far’s thighs, cupping between his legs. “See? Very different.”

"Forgive me for not catching the difference." The sarcasm is lost in how breathy his voice is now, and Ja'far's eyes briefly shut, the little shudder that twitches down his spine enough to make his legs spread, just a bit wider. "If I were just indulging you," he breathes, "wouldn't you know?"

“Hmmm, you probably wouldn’t be quite so hard,” Sinbad allows, stroking slowly, enjoying the feel of the heavy warm weight in one large hand. “I’m glad you are, though. Want me to take care of you?” There’s probably just a little too much eagerness in his voice.

Ja'far muffles a groan into the pillow at that, his hips twitching forward, down into Sinbad's hand. "How about taking care of both of us?" He swallows hard, skin flushing even more underneath the pink of his sunburn. "Don't you think... I missed being home, too?"

“It helps that you’re saying it,” Sinbad murmurs, squeezing lightly as he pulls in a slow, easy motion, pressing a kiss to one pale thigh, parting his lips to suck and nibble. “How can your king serve you?”

"I'm giving you free rein, and you're asking me?" Ja'far has to stifle a laugh at that. "I'm tipsy and deliberately fell into your bed and talked about incestuous royal families for an hour, do what you want with me."
Good enough, and Sinbad has been more than obedient. He wriggles down onto his back, head between Ja’far’s legs, taking the tip of his cock in his mouth and sucking. His hands splay on Ja’far’s thighs, his own cock hardening thick and heavy between his legs, and he moans, tongue tracing little circles as he leans up.

That's not quite fair.

Ja'far shudders, twisting down to slide a hand up through Sinbad's hair, hesitant to pull, but a little unable to help himself, besides; not when Sinbad's mouth is so hot and his nerves already a little frayed about the edges. "You always… Sin, you don't have to do it like this, you know--"

Sinbad doesn’t answer. The only answer would be that he knows, that he likes doing this, and that’s not the easiest thing for a man to admit, even an man like him. He drags his tongue down the underside of Ja’far’s cock, closing his eyes at he slide of hands in his hair, unable to stop himself from letting out urgent, eager little noises as his hands come up, cupping Ja’far’s ass, down to his thighs, up again.

How is he suppose to resist when Sinbad sounds like that, is so damnably eager, and god, his mouth feels nice. Ja'far swallows hard around a groan, his fingers sliding closer to Sinbad's scalp, tangling up and through his hair as his hips cant forward on their own accord, biting his lip as his cock slides hard and aching over that slick, insistent tongue, thankful for the dim light in the room that makes it harder to see what Sinbad is doing to him. He’s certain, then, that he’d retain that much less self-control, and god, it’s hard enough already.

Sinbad pulls down, bringing Ja’far closer, letting him relax his head down to the bed so he can lay there, hungry, sucking as well as he can, making urgent, needy little noises as his tongue curls, and Ja’far thrusts into his mouth. He squeezes Ja’far’s ass, pulling him closer still as his other hand steals down between his own legs, palming over his own cock as he pulls off, breathing heavily as he drags his mouth down, mouthing over Ja’far’s balls before sucking the head into his mouth again, taking it as deep as he can manage.

"Sin--"

The man's name stutters when it catches in his throat, and Ja'far shivers, shutting his eyes as his hands fist tighter into Sinbad's hair, holding him there when his hips lurch forward, too eager, too hard to stop himself when Sinbad's mouth is so damnably good and the way his throat feels when he's swallowing around him too perfect. Normally, this feels awkward at best, not of the mind to have his king down and between his legs like this, but--god, he'd be an idiot not to see how Sin enjoys it just now, and that makes him harder than anything.
He swallows, the muscles in his thighs and stomach bunching, and his hands loosen up just a bit, to let Sinbad have a little bit more freedom of movement. "I… g-god, where do you want me to…”

Sinbad doesn’t want freedom.

He wants Ja’far, wants to taste him and hold him and make sure he doesn’t go anywhere again, wants the man in every way he can get him, and just now, with the wine buzzing in his head and the taste of the man on his tongue, he imagines for just a second what it would be like to have that pale length inside him, to flip Ja’far onto his back and lower himself down--

He jerks up into his hand, squeezing the base of his cock hard to keep from coming already, letting a low, heady moan around Ja’far’s cock be his answer.

That little rumble of Sinbad's voice twists low and hot in his belly, and Ja'far's fingers tighten, fistng them hard into Sinbad's hair to pull him down again before he can even think. He probably bites his own lip until it bleeds, and there's no helping the way his hips rut forward, sliding deep and hard down the slickness of Sinbad's throat before he's lost, coming with a ragged exhale, a groan choked down his throat when all he can think about is how good Sin's tongue feels and the images in his own mind aren't anywhere near as obscene what's actually between his legs just then.

Sinbad enjoys this too much.

He knows he does, lets himself when it’s been a while and Ja’far is tipsy and needy and clutching, and he swallows hard, sucking Ja’far until he’s thoroughly done, then licking him clean with a few sweeps of his tongue. His breath comes short and quick, and he looks far too pleased with himself as he wriggles out from under Ja’far, wiping his mouth with a thumb as he strips off what’s left of his robes. “Different,” he muses. “Going to need to get you back on Sindrian food, I like the taste better.” And that’s one of the lewdest things he’s said aloud in quite a while, even for him.

"Sin, just shut up," Ja'far breathlessly groans, flopping himself back down into the sheets with a shuddering exhale to follow, his face flushed hot. "You're such a pervert, why do I even put up with you--"

Sinbad grins, shaking out his hair, mussed as it is from Ja’far’s handling. “Because you enjoy it more than you pretend to?” he suggests, one hand still stroking and squeezing his own cock, eyes locked on Ja’far’s chest as he moves, the little trembles in his thighs, those freckles dusting his cheeks and nose.
"There's still a line to be drawn." His eyes slide down to Sinbad's cock, and Ja'far swallows around a dry throat, tongue flicking out to wet his lips. "… Did you want to put it in, or…"

Sinbad raises one eyebrow. “Or?”

Ja'far glowers at him, or tries to. Easier said than done when he's still out of breath and thoroughly flushed. "Or whatever else you're having obscene thoughts about."

Sinbad laughs. “You'll have to be more clear,” he murmurs, eyes fluttering as he curls his wrist, adding a little twist to his motion. “I have obscene thoughts about every part of you, sometimes before breakfast.”

Ah. Well, that's more than likely very, very true. "… What could you possibly have… god, didn't I already offer to let you do anything? I'm being tolerant tonight," Ja'far bemoans, draping an arm over his eyes so he's less inclined to watch the slide and stroke of Sinbad's hand over his cock.

"If you’re being so tolerant,” Sinbad murmurs, sidling up on his knees close enough that he can feel the warmth of Ja'far’s skin against his own, “why don’t you do as I ask, and tell me…how do you want me to spill, Ja'far?” Ah, even saying the words makes him throb, and his hand speeds up a bit, just to take the edge off. “Inside you? Over your tongue? In your hand, on your thighs, on your belly? From just your voice, or the bottom of your foot, or on your pretty face?"

"I…” It's not very fair, given a choice like that, not when Sinbad is so warm and solid above him after several weeks without, not when his cock is obviously so, so hard and he'd probably spill the instant Ja'far answers him. His throat bobs in a hard swallow. "… What did you miss the most?” he breathlessly asks, though he knows that question will probably get him nowhere, and tries again, as his own hand slides own hesitantly to drag a thumb over the head of Sinbad's cock. "What have you thought about the most… when you just use your hand like this, when I'm not here?"

Asking Ja'far to talk was a mistake. Sinbad can’t handle it well, knows he can’t, and asks anyway every time because he never comes harder than after hearing lewd words in that calm, studious voice. It’s not so calm now, it’s breathy and hitched, and the hand that brushes over his cock is as shaky as his own pulse. “Your--between your legs,” Sinbad breathes, hips jerking up to try and rut against that hand. “I was thinking about--the look on your face and how you grab the bedsheets when I slide between your thighs, and hoping you’d fall asleep in my bed so I could do that in the morning, when you’re all--sleepy and warm and smiling--” He’s not going to last long enough to do anything, at this rate.
Ja'far sucks in a breath, thinking it'll steady him when it does nothing of the sort, and he grabs more insistently for Sinbad's cock even as he wriggles down, eager to ease it between his thighs when he hears those words. "Like this, then?" he breathes, shivering hard. "I can--do you want me to squeeze them around you when you spill? O-or do you just… want to come all over them--"

“Squeeze,” Sinbad groans out, so eager it’s hardly even a word, hands fumbling for Ja’far’s hips to pull him close, eyes rolling back into his head at the first soft, warm press of those warm thighs around his cock. “Just--like that, as hard as you can, you’ve got enough squish on you that you won’t hurt me--"

He bites his lip, rutting forward as his breath gets too erratic, too urgent for regular speech, burying his face in Ja'far's shoulder as he thrusts.

This is at least a dozen times more obscene than if Sinbad were actually inside of him. Ja'far squirms, twisting to better wriggle himself down to do as he's asked, his thighs shivering, muscles trembling as he squeezes them tight around Sinbad's cock, his own hands a shaky addition to keep them closed when Sinbad thrusts harder. "You're really… really hard," he rasps out, his own eyes fluttering as he lets his head roll back into the sheets. "Just… you don't have to hold back, it's fine--"

Sinbad lets out a soft cry, biting down on a freckled shoulder as he snaps forward hard, hands clenching tight enough to leave bruises, something he was trying not to do for once, but there’s no helping it, not when he’s so riled up, not when he can still taste Ja’far on his tongue, and he spills long and ragged between Ja’far’s thighs, eyes sliding shut as he collapses with a groan.

Long moments of blackness later, he stirs, and grimaces. “Sorry. I forgot, your sunburn…”

"I'll survive," Ja'far murmurs, setting his arms firmly about Sinbad's shoulders to keep him close at least for another moment. "You can rub aloe all on it again before we go to sleep." He pauses, contemplative for a moment before slowly asking: "The bottom of my foot?"

Sinbad shrugs, unapologetic. “Everything about you, Ja'far. There isn’t a place on your body I’d refuse, if you offered it to me.” He wraps an arm around his waist, settling him close as he reaches for the aloe, forgoing the brush to dab it on the man’s shoulders with his fingers. “And not a time I’d refuse you.”

"… Mmn, well," Ja'far eventually says, eyes lidding as he starts to relax a bit beneath the slide of Sinbad's fingers. "At least we aren't siblings of any kind."
Some things are very, very difficult to keep an impassive face, a convincing lie through.

Knowledge of what Kouen has planned upon arriving to pick up his lover-apparent is certainly one of those things.

Ja'far has never traveled so fast, and this time, he's careful to wrap himself all the more tightly within cloth to avoid sunburns. It's a five day trip turned to three, and the sight of Sindria makes him nearly dizzy upon arriving home, the docks and her people bustling no matter the late hour.

There are no games to play with the guards this time, not with how quickly he needs to see Sinbad. The stairs are faster than scaling walls, besides, and he takes them two at a time, ignoring the startled gazes of servants as he sweeps past.

He doesn't knock, and yanks away his shemagh as he steps into his king's private chambers. "You should have let me take that ring into Kou."

Sinbad drops the smile immediately, and a quick word and the serious expression on his face sends the girl scurrying for the hall immediately, hastily straightening her blouse. All mirth is gone from his face as he stands, pulling out a chair for Ja'far and locking the doors and windows in a flash. "What's gone wrong?"

"Kouen's new plans." Ja'far sucks in a calming breath, no matter that he can feel his pulse pounding in his ears still, and has for days. "When he comes to retrieve Hakuei, he's going to give you two 'options.' Surrender, or he'll sink Sindria into the ocean."

Sinbad spares a quick look out the window, at the little moving dots that are hundreds, thousands of his people, laughing and dancing and eating and making love with no idea something like this even exists. "Can he do it?" Best not to say that's impossible, not if Kouen believes it.

"His Magi can. Think of Partevia for five seconds." Another, deep breath. "Give me the ring, and I'll turn around right now and make sure it's there in a pair of days."

"And give it to Judal how?" Sinbad demands. "Judal won't take anything from your hands, he doesn't trust you at all." He grabs the ring from its hiding place, tossing it to Ja'far. "If you think you
can, and get out of there before there’s any chance it’ll spread beyond where you want it to, go now.”

"He’s certainly no more fond of you right now!” Ja’far wavers all the same, knowing Sinbad is right and intensely annoyed by the Magi in question even more than usual. He rolls the box in one hand before exhaling a long sigh and throwing it onto the bed. "It needs to get to him sooner rather than later. The wretch talks of making you his slave like it's some sort of a game."

“I don’t care what he wants to do to me, I’m not letting him hurt my people!” Sinbad’s voice rings out clear as he snatches up the box, stowing it again. “You know his mental state. What are the chances he’ll go through with it, especially after we return his woman safe and sound?”

"Kouen hates you. It's entirely illogical, and his woman is going to have nothing to do with it.” Ja'far tries not to pace. It's easier said than done, but he stops himself narrowly by digging a thumb into one temple. "It doesn't matter what you say to him. The idea of you wanting peace is hilarious to him."

Sinbad gnaws on his lower lip, thinking. “How soon before they get here?” Never mind that he’s done nothing to the man, nothing to spark this kind of personal deep-seated hatred, there’s no point thinking about the injustice of it all when there are lives to save yet.

"A week, maybe a week and a half. It was unclear as to whether or not they'd pause to feast in Kouha's name regarding his inevitable victory in Magnoshutatt." Which is another thing that makes him want to grind his teeth, but first things first. "The only thing I can think of is… if you do surrender yourself, it probably will allow you directly into the Imperial City, if Judal is as serious about keeping you as he says he is."

Sinbad freezes, giving Ja’far a long look. “You’re that confident in the boy’s abilities? You think he can take down all those magicians? They’re more fearsome than anyone gives them credit for, they’ve managed to last on their own a long time between two mighty powers.” The other suggestion he sets aside for the moment, rubbing his chin and thinking.

Ja'far sighs, shrugging. "Lest Gyokuen involves herself again… yes, I think the Red Scourge will take Magnoshutatt. He has a penchant for collecting powerful magicians of his own, witches flock to him, not to mention his army seems to love him--especially now that talk has spread that his defeat wasn't his own doing."

“Damn. That’s not good news.” Sinbad sits, tugging Ja’far down to his lap. “Helps me think,” he mutters, securing an arm around Ja’far’s waist. It helps him think, and at least like this he doesn’t feel quite so much like everything is going horribly wrong. “Judal is mercurial. It’s the most difficult
thing about him to deal with.”

Ja'far opens his mouth to protest, but there's little help for it when he doesn't want to protest so much anyway, and so he sags backward with a sigh, the tremors in aching muscles dissolving into the warmth of Sinbad's chest. "Do you believe me now when I said we should have just killed him long ago?"

“He's a tool, Ja'far. Kouen would have used another way. I should have expected something like this, all his campaigns are brutal and surprising and short.” Sinbad’s hands finally unclench, and he strokes gently over Ja’far’s forearms, holding him close. “He’s just that sort of a man. But you should be glad. If Judal is willing to do this...I’ll give him the damn thing from my own hand.”

"Oh, I know Judal's willing,” he mutters, his eyes lidding as they cast down to watch the slide of Sinbad's hands. "I've heard nothing but his excitement and gloating for the entirety of my stay there this time. One would think Kouen would have at least a bit more kindness toward us, considering we saved Hakuei. Perhaps we should ransom her after all." Too little too late, Ja'far knows, but he's annoyed.

“No, she’s innocent in this. It isn’t her fault she’s in love with a fool of a king, I’ll not have her punished for that.” He bows his head, nestling comfortably, chin hooked over Ja’far’s shoulder. “I suppose I’ll be surrendering, then. Or perhaps we should have you show your true colors and betray me, hmm?”

That brings about a snort of a laugh. "He'd probably find that entertaining. Considering that I wouldn't put it past him to order Sindria sunk to the ocean floor even if you did surrender... that might be a good idea. This way, he might give it to me." Ja'far bites his lip, tilting his head to the side to rest it against Sinbad's. "Everyone will be furious, but if we go that route, it's best that we don't tell the other generals. Otherwise, they'll hesitate in attempting to defend or rescue you, and Kouen will know."

Sinbad makes a face. “I don’t like that, but it’s a good idea. They’re not all the best actors. Too honest, too trusting, too noble. But...do you really think we’ll be able to convince them that you’ve betrayed me? They know how close to my side you are and have always been.”

Ja'far's expression turns wry. "I can be very convincing, though I apologize in advance for any bruises you receive in the process. I'll try to make it worth your while, at least."

Sinbad flips him onto his back on the bed, looming over him, hair spilling over one shoulder. “Make it worth my while now. If it’s going to be a long trek to Kou on my knees, I’ll have the memory of
your arms to keep me warm at least.”

Hesitation flickers over Ja'far's face, just for a moment, and he slides a hand up, grabbing for Sinbad's hair to slide his fingers through it. "I should have seen this coming," he quietly, worriedly admits. "As an advisor, I can't help but think I've failed you somewhat."

Sinbad shakes his head at that. "I did see it coming," he murmurs. "Any country that can be raised can be sunk. It was always an option.” He slides his arms under Ja'far's back, pulling him up, drinking in the feel, the warmth of him. "No sunburn this time?” he asks breathlessly, and claims Ja'far's lips with his own.

It would probably do little good to tell Sinbad he especially made sure to avoid it--and far more important are the man's lips, besides, tension leaving him in a shuddering groan as both hands lift to slide through Sinbad's hair. "You're really not suited to be on your knees," Ja'far breathes, wriggling so that his thighs splay to either side of his hips. "Or if you are, they are hardly fit to see you on them.”

“The only man I want to be on my knees for is a worthy one,” Sinbad murmurs, casting off his robes as he nestsles firmly between Ja'far’s legs, the ache of the brevity of their last coupling still with him after weeks. “But I don’t want to think of other men when I’m here with you.” He doesn’t want to think of anything at all when they’re like this, rocking gently together. “Give me the oil, I’ve no patience tonight.”

Ja'far flushes hot at that, but he hardly hesitates, not when Sinbad is warm and already aching between his legs, making his own breath hitch and his own body shudder. He squirms about, grabbing a bottle of the stuff from its usual side table, pressing it into Sinbad's grasp. "This is hardly the last time, you know--"

“It might be.” Sinbad slicks his fingers, sliding one in smoothly, hoping that makes up for his lack of caution, for his speed, and a second joins it quickly. He wouldn’t even bother except it’s been so long since he’s properly taken Ja'far, and the faces the other man makes are worth any wait. “Any moment could be our last for all we know, there’s a mad wizard with unlimited power who wants to sink us into the sea. Wrap your legs around me, love.”

A twitching, shuddering exhale sends a tense ache down his spine, and Ja'far's eyes unfocus for a moment, the long, slick slide of Sinbad's fingers inside of him making him think of exactly how fast his legs would buckle out beneath him, were he standing just then. "Can you… not talk like that?” he groans, his toes curling as he wriggles down, legs trembling as he moves to do as he's told. "I never thought I'd hate it, you not being an optimist, but--"
Sinbad laughs, but it’s a gentle thing, full of warmth, and he pulls his hand free to slick himself up, sliding urgently between Ja’far’s legs. “You’re right. The feel of you is heady enough without talk of impending doom.” He kisses Ja’far again, slow and deep, and murmurs against his lips, “Never fear. Sindria won’t sink, and I won’t fall, as long as I have my wits and you. Ask me to come inside.”

"You're talking to me like I'm one of your girls," Ja'far slowly accues against Sinbad's mouth, though hardly sounds annoyed about it, especially when his hands splay over the backs of his shoulders, pulling him down all the more. He squirms, thighs squeezing tight to either side of Sinbad's hips, and no matter how his face flushes--"Put it in, I want you."

Hardly, when you saw me evict one of them from my bed to pull you into it. Sinbad drags his hands down to the small of Ja’far’s back, lifting him easily off the bed as he guides himself in, the head catching on Ja’far’s hole as he slowly, smoothly pushes forward. It’s tighter than he remembers somehow, squeezing him hot and sweet and perfect, and Sinbad has to stop before he’s halfway in, catching his shuddering breath. “You’re--ah, relax, I’m going to--just try, you feel so good--”

It's always, always a too-tense, too-tight slide, especially after so long. As wound-tight as he is, it's even more difficult than usual, and Ja'far twitches and shivers, biting his lip as his thighs bunch and visibly tremble with the tension that ripples through him. "Trying," he rasps out, his eyes rolling back at the thick, aching stretch of Sinbad inside of him, his nails biting into broad shoulders as his chest heaves and his head falls back. "You're really… really too much--"

One urgent, too-fast roll of his hips, and Sinbad gives up with a groan. It’s too much, being buried in that tight heat, and he thrusts in again and again, loving the way Ja’far looks when he’s stuffed more full than he thinks he can take, the desperate, overwhelmed craving in his eyes. “You want all of me, though,” he grunts, biting down on Ja’far’s neck as he plants his knees firmly on the bed, hissing out a breath as each thrust gets less and less gentle. “You can take it, even if you don’t think you can.”

Ja'far's mouth falls open, his back arching to the point that aching tension makes him tremble all over, the deep, thick press of Sinbad's cock inside of him making his vision blur. "I..." A hard, rapid swallow, and Ja'far ruts down no matter how much he aches, no matter the tense burn around all that slickness, his breath fast and ragged when his cock grinds into the flat plane of Sinbad's stomach. "I--just--bite me again, I--" Want a reminder, make it last.

Sinbad’s hands dig in hard to Ja’far’s hips, leaving bruises and glad of it, biting again and wanting to see the marks, wanting to see them tomorrow and next week, fine red things at first faded into purple bruises, a reminder that he’d been used hard and put away wet, that he’s been claimed. “You look,” he breathes, thrusting in hard, back arching with each powerful thrust as his hips slap against Ja’far’s, “like you’ve truly been owned by your king.”

His hands scrabble against Sinbad's shoulders, leaving marks of his own in the form of sharp, red
scratches when his back arches so hard that it makes his body *twinge* deep inside, a point of tension that rips the air from his lungs and leaves him panting, gasping as he wriggles down harder onto Sinbad's cock. "G-good," Ja'far manages, blinking hard when his vision shifts cloudy and wet. "Good, so long as it's *you*—ah, *god*, j-just fill me up, *please*—"

The way Ja'far's voice goes hoarse and pleading is *beautiful*, makes Sinbad know he's serving him well, makes him lunge in hard and fast, no sounds but the wet slap of their bodies, the ragged panting of breath, and he groans, vision going white as pleasure wracks his body, makes him buck and tense, spilling deep in Ja'far with an almighty moan before he collapses, boneless and replete, one hand snaking between them to close around the pulsing length of Ja'far's cock. "Show me," he gasps, chest heaving, "you love that feeling."

It's not *fair*, and he'd never quite admit it aloud, but it's *true*, all the same.

Ja'far's hips lurch up, a mindless, heady groan pulling from his throat as he ruts against Sinbad's hand, the slide of familiar, calloused fingers that much more intoxicating when he feels so full, so damnably *sick* inside, and he bucks up with a gasp, clinging to handfuls of Sinbad's hair when he comes, his back arched taut and hips jerking to grind in hard little circles. "*God*, I--"

Sinbad buries his face in Ja'far's neck, kissing and nibbling, broad hands sliding up and down that pale, freckled back in slow strokes, gentling him down from that ecstatic high. Neither of them are good at self-control when they come together like this, and he gives himself long moments to breathe, pressed against that familiar body. "Stay. Just tonight, stay."

"I'm not leaving," Ja'far hoarsely promises, his arms flopping to drape over Sinbad's shoulders and slide over his back as he sags back into the bed with a lingering shudder. "You're *still* just… far too much, you know that?"

"For someone who says that every time," Sinbad murmurs, turning Ja'far gently to curl up behind him, "you do keep gracing my bed. Not that I'm not grateful."

"I'm a masochist," is the throaty laugh to follow, and Ja'far lets his weight sink back against Sinbad, shivering in spite of the warmth of his form curled about him. "It's also just *you*.

“I think it’s us.” Sinbad can’t quite stop himself from kissing the pale shell of that ear, flushed with pulsing blood, and that soft neck. “It’s not like this with anyone else, not ever. You’re….ah, you’re my undoing.”
"I'll accept that," Ja'far murmurs, letting his head roll down into the bed, not exactly adverse to Sinbad's attentions just then. He makes a languid, weary grab for one of Sinbad's hands. "If you talk like this is the last time again, however, I'll make sure I'm the end of you."

Sinbad lets his hand curl around Ja'far’s, squeezing a little. “Don’t be ridiculous. There’ll never be a last time. Not while there’s magic in the world, not for us.”

"Amazing how you forget about the things that come out of your very own mouth after a good orgasm," Ja'far mutters, though it's hardly a complaint as his fingers squeeze back.

“Attempting to set the mood with a little jeopardy is hardly predicting our doom,” Sinbad murmurs, eyelids fluttering. “Rest assured, I’m far less interested in the end of the world and more in you being in my arms when I wake.”

"I'm not leaving, I told you as much," Ja'far sighs, a pointed wriggle back into Sinbad's chest following. "Perhaps this once, I'll feign sick and spend the morning, too."

“You don’t need to feign sick,” Sinbad says in amusement, nuzzling into his shoulder. “I think you have over three years in sick days saved up, and I’m certain your boss won’t mind.”

"My boss is a lazy thing that would sooner languish in bed than ever get his work done, though."

“What a rude creature. Get back at him by taking extra time off.”

"No. That makes me break out in hives."

Sinbad kisses a freckle, snuggling down to the bed. “Just the morning, then. For all that you say I’m too much, I never get enough of you.”

"You really are on a poetic mission tonight, aren't you," Ja'far sighs, reaching for the sheets to pull them up and around them.

“Whatever gets you to stay.”
As much as he might cover it with laughter and surety, Sinbad is worried. He doesn’t mean to be, tries to hide it, but that constant gnawing knowledge that at any moment he could hear the horns, the trumpets of an approaching army with a madman ready to sink everything he’s worked for into the sea….it worries at him like a dog with a rag.

It makes him too keen, probably, to have Ja’far in his bed, in his arms, held tight and gasping under his touch, and Sinbad knows he’s too insistent, too forceful. He doesn’t care enough to stop. He’s had Ja’far on most of the surfaces in the palace this week, and all that stops him now is the state dinner. Even now he manages to sit across from Ja’far, and if one foot toes off its shoe and starts to slide up the inside of a scarred leg, well, it’s not necessarily his foot.

He sips his wine, a smile hovering around his lips as his eyes flick to meet Ja’far’s.

Even if it isn’t necessarily Sinbad's foot, Ja'far knows that it is.

He fairly chokes on his next sip of water, and it clicks, the reason why Sinbad was so content to sit across from him and not beside him when he's been all but clinging to him for the past week. His eyes narrow as he shifts back in his chair, firmly pressing his knees together to keep Sinbad's foot from creeping too much higher.

*Behave, you damned idiot.*

Sinbad bats his eyelashes innocently, worming his foot up the top of a thigh, his legs long enough that his toes brush the very bottom of Ja’far’s abdomen. “That’s a good point,” he says aloud to Sharrkan, turning a little in his seat. “Though I think Hinahoho doesn’t need my help!”

At the chorus of laughter that follows, he drags his heel down, pressing between Ja’far’s thighs.

Ja'far is glad no one can quite hear his irritated growl as he shoves a hand underneath the table, grabbing hold of Sinbad’s foot in one hand and squeezing. He's rather tempted, for a moment, to yank and watch the man tumble to the ground underneath the table in an undignified heap.
Another thought occurs to him instead.

It's best to fight fire with fire, after all. A casual shove, and Sinbad's foot slides from his lap, and Ja'far toes off one of his own shoes, giving Sinbad's ankle a light prod with his toes before they begin sliding their way up.

Wine nearly flows from Sinbad’s nose, and his knee bangs against the table as he yanks his leg back in reflex, drawing raised eyebrows as he raises a hand, choking down his breath. “This pepper is spicy tonight,” he gasps, and ignores Pisti as she makes a rude comment. He swallows hard, looking up at Ja’far’s serene expression, and rising to the challenge, mirroring the other man’s movements as his toes slide slowly up the slightly raised skin on the inside of one ankle. You think you can get to me better than I can to you? Let’s find out.

Ja’far shifts, just slightly, enough to nudge Sinbad’s foot away as his own slides up higher, toes kneading along the inside of his knee. He takes a slow sip of his drink, expression impassive even through a question of when do I have to have that paperwork back to you, exactly, though his foot is sliding high up the inside of one, muscular thigh.

Sinbad forfeits his own torments with good, or at least some grace, though his hand is a bit more white-knuckled on his spoon than he intends at the slide of one lean, lithe foot. He’d intended a little tease, that was all, but this is getting to him far more than it should, and all he can think is that he’s not sure Ja’far’s legs are long enough to do this properly, not when he wants so badly. “I’ve never been less than, ah, satisfied with your work,” he manages, and his cheeks heat with a dark flush as he downs the rest of his wine, looking for patience in the glass and finding none.

His legs would be if the table were a bit more narrow, but unceremoniously pulling his chair closer as he nibbles on a piece of sliced fruit goes unnoticed--except by Sinbad, who probably feels the drag of Ja’far's foot between his legs all the more acutely when Ja’far can properly press, his heel grinding in just slightly.

Sinbad moves a hand under the table, batting ineffectively at Ja’far’s foot when it suddenly becomes impossible to think properly, every labored breath a chore as his world narrows to the minuscule drag of Ja’far’s foot against his swelling cock. Every breath is a little slower, more deliberate, and he leans into it, looking over and begging silently. Finish it. Please.

Ah, well, that was a victory a little too easily procured.

Ja’far wriggles his toes, contemplative before his foot simply slides away entirely and he shifts back into his seat, pushing away from the table without batting an eye.
For a split second, Sinbad imagines throwing Ja’far facedown on the table, in the midst of all the food and drink and people watching, and fucking him senseless right then and there without even removing his clothing first. It’s an appealing thought, and only with great effort of will does he manage to excuse himself politely from the table instead, following on Ja’far’s heels.

That decorum doesn’t last long, and two big hands catch Ja’far around the waist, hoisting him into the air and over the side of a long hall table. “Hold on tight,” he grunts, parting his robes to pull himself out. “I’ll be quick.”

Ja'far barely bites back a shriek, squirming and thrashing as he glares up at Sinbad, cheeks flushed hot. "Very funny--you are not doing this here, Sin!" So much for victory, when Sinbad doesn't quite play fair. "Put your cock up, you're not touching me until we're behind a locked door at least--"

“Shut up,” Sinbad hisses, reaching down and grabbing an ankle, “or everyone will hear you.” He grabs the other one too for good measure, holding them with an iron grip as he brings Ja’far’s feet back, thumbing off his shoes as he slides forward against the soles of his feet, sighing in relief at the first smooth slide. “Unless you want people to see this.”

The next sound that flees his throat is a squeak, impossible to bite back when it's so indignant (and terribly confused, besides). "W-what are you--" That flush darkens, and Ja'far wriggles, yanking at one leg in an attempt to free it and pull away. "Sin, I'm serious, what in the world are you thinking? Stop it already!"

“If you hold still and stay quiet,” Sinbad grunts, holding tighter, and no matter how slippery Ja’far is, Sinbad’s got a good hold on him and he’s strong, “this will be over fast. Just--a little bit, this is your payment for leaving me that hard at the table.”

His eyes half-close as he makes a pair of smooth surfaces to slide against, pressing and wriggling for all Ja’far’s efforts to escape, and it’s strange, like nothing he’s ever felt before, enough pressure to make it good but rough and strange enough to make it exciting, illicit even for him.

"You started that, you know!” It's a weak argument, especially when Ja'far does end up clamping a hand over his own mouth at the louder squeak of protest that wants to escape. Of all the things Sinbad has ever done, this is definitely one of the strangest--his feet, really?! Ja'far's eyes squeeze shut, not wanting to watch the obscene slide and rut of Sinbad's cock between them, but that makes him feel it all the more, that slippery, hot drag that is really just obscene.
Sinbad lurches forward to nip sharply at Ja’far’s shoulder, as much to keep himself quiet as to enjoy the feel of Ja’far’s skin between his teeth, rutting up faster against the soles of his feet, slicker with every slide as his cock throbs and leaks. “Every part of you,” he mutters, casting aside the worry that someone will see, someone will notice. “Everything about you is so lewd--if I spill on your feet--ahh, the only way it’ll be clean is if I spill in your mouth, your choice--” The thought makes him harder, and his cock twitches and jumps.

Ja’far chokes down a whimper, shaking his head firmly at that idea. His toes curl on their own volition, the muscles of his legs bunching and twitching with every slide of Sinbad's cock against him, and it's hard not to crack his eyes open--to make sure no one is around and seeing this, he tells himself, though his eyes flicker to Sinbad, watching the man run against him (his feet, of all things), the obvious, unrestrained pleasure on his face--

His hand slides from his mouth, just a fraction. "If--that's what you want--"

Sinbad’s eyes roll back into his head, and his hips snap forward hard. “Too late,” he mutters breathlessly on a choked laugh, and with another hard slap forward he spills long and hot, onto Ja’far’s feet and the floor of the Palace, a long, low groan in his throat.

Sinbad definitely wins awards tonight for being bizarre--how in the world does he get off on his feet, anyway? Ja’far huffs out a hot breath, cheeks flushed dark and red and he gingerly makes to tug his legs away, grimacing at the stickiness along the bottom of his feet. "You are such a pervert."

Sinbad pulls back a little sheepishly, looking down at the evidence of his rather disturbing loss of control. “I, ah….” He shrugs, at something of a loss to say, and ends up just laughing at himself. “Well. That’s one more part of many down, at least!”

Ja’far stares at him. "Do you have a list of things you’d like to rut against like a dog regardless of my protests?"

“Well,” Sinbad hedges, “I’d rather do them without your protests. And it isn’t as if I have the list written down, that would just be crude.”

"I'm going to wipe my feet off on your goddamned metal vessels."

“You know, I think at least a couple of my djinn would enjoy that.”
"Don't remind me," Ja'far bemoans, his head flopping back in defeat. "You're all awful and incorrigible."

“If you don’t want to leave incriminating footprints,” Sinbad says with a lascivious grin, “I can always carry you back to your room. Or my room.”

"… Why do I think it's going to be your room regardless?"

“I’ll hardly force you. You’re unpleasant when I do that,” Sinbad says logically, picking Ja’far up casually in his arms.

"Right, you seemed to think my feet were pleasant enough in spite of my protests,” Ja'far sniffs, flopping an arm about Sinbad's shoulders all the same.

Sinbad takes the stairs easily, a fond smile on his face. “Well, sometimes I can’t really tell exactly when your protests are genuine and when you just need to be convinced.”

Ja'far glowers up at him. "If I kick you in the face, that should be a fairly good indication."

“Do you mean to tell me you hated that?” Sinbad asks mildly, pausing to sweep down to give Ja’far a slow, deep kiss. “Because I thoroughly enjoyed it,” he murmurs against those soft lips.

"I didn't exactly kick you in the face, now did I?" Ja'far mutters, eyes lidding as he tilts his head up to kiss back, no matter the slow, put-out sigh to escape through his nose. "You're the worst. Of all the things…"

Sinbad shrugs. “It’s not that of all the things,” he explains, nudging the door to his room open and laying Ja’far on the bed. “It’s just...one of the things. One of all of them. How many times do I have to tell you? It’s everything about you, head to toe.”

Ja'far's head shakes at that, and he flops back with a sigh. "If you say so. I suppose it's flattering, to know you can get off even on my feet."

Sinbad curls an arm around his waist, pulling him close against his chest, tucking his chin down on
top of Ja’far’s head. “Want me to do anything for you in kind? You were squeaking pretty loud in the hall.”

"I certainly was not." Ja’far huffs into the other man’s shoulder, butting his face into Sinbad’s neck. "I'm fine, though. So long as you are satisfied."

Sinbad trails a finger up one arm. “Always satisfied with you. Could always be more satisfied. You certain you don’t want me to do anything? I don’t like to think of you languishing in my arms.”

"You just want an excuse to put your cock on some other part of me again, don't you?"

Sinbad raises an eyebrow. “You think I can’t get you off without using my cock? Are my mouth and hands so loathsome to you now? You know your king is at your service, should you ever wish a thing from my body.”

"It was a joke, Sin." Ja’far idly reaches up to give Sinbad’s side a pinch. "Do allow me a bit of a chance to merely share your bed without needing sometime from it other than your presence."

That, from anyone else, would elicit a quiet groan and an exasperated sigh. From Ja’far, it makes Sinbad smile. Rare enough, that he gets between Ja’far’s legs. Rarer still, that he sleeps in Sinbad’s arms. “All right.” Somehow, even without a smell, he breathes Ja’far in deep.
Chapter 9

Judal can't help but feel the slightest bit of irritation when they arrive in Sindria, mostly because it's the first time he's seen it in what feels like ages, and it's to possibly blow the place up.

Of course, Kouen's promised options. Judal knows the man can be as moody as he is, though, and so he makes a mental note to cling to Sinbad's arm if need be. Kouen had promised a chance to let him keep the man, after all, and if the island's going down, then he still wants that much of a promise to be kept.

"Their shields are so dumb," Judal mutters, trying not to think too hard on how he'd make shields better suited than any of Sinbad's magicians ever could, especially when a poke makes the things shatter and allows for their easy entrance inside.

(He'd ask if Kouen's going to kiss Hakuei the second he sees her, but he never seems to like talking about her--stupid, considering Judal would talk about someone like that all he could.)

Kouen stares at the place, the first time he's laid physical eyes on the island kingdom of Sindria. “It’s a little bit beautiful, isn’t it?” he muses, folding his arms over his chest. It’s too good for Sinbad, that wastrel, that rogue, no better than a common thief, putting countries into his pockets like an urchin with bits of bread and shiny beads. “I wonder what sort of noise it will make. Do you think it’ll go all at once with a little slurp, or slowly, with shaking rocks and screaming and a boiling ocean of debris?”

Judal pouts, lower lip jutting as he slowly steers the carpet lower. "You really don't think he'll surrender? He probably will, you know. He's got this thing about protecting people."

“Oh, I’m counting on him being stupid enough to surrender.” Kouen grins, his lips pulling back from his teeth. “Whether or not we’ll get to sink the island depends on whether he likes my conditions. Say hello for us, Judal. Make it loud.”

Ah, like he'd ever turn down an excuse to show off.

A twirl of his wand, and it's easy enough to simply blow through the roof over Sinbad's throne room, an entrance he's rather fond of procuring by now. The falling rubble and screams of fleeing servants are entertaining in and of themselves, but nothing quite matches the looks on the generals' faces, especially Ja'far's. For a moment, Judal wonders if he'll be attacked again, if only just for so, the little
snake—but Ja'far refrains, and Judal snorts, tucking his wand away again in disappointment for the moment.

"You're all so docile in your old age," he sighs out, still pouting by the time his feet touch the ground—well, for all of a second. Broken up rocks aren't pleasant beneath his feet, and so Judal tucks his legs up underneath himself, hovering near Kouen's side all the same. "And here I was hoping for a little more resistance."

Sinbad restrains himself—barely, and only through great effort—from equipping his djinn right away. This is a ruse, a game, though the invading Emperor thinks it's quite a different one, and Judal knows him well enough that he'll have to play the part spectacularly. He stands, feet apart, hands clenching into fists. "Is this the sort of welcome you bring to escort your family back home?" he demands, glaring up at the hovering pair.

“Where is the Lady Hakuei?” Kouen asks, voice cold and flat.

Sinbad holds out a hand, nodding at one of the figures seated comfortably close to his throne. “Here, as my guest of honor.”

Kouen takes an involuntary, excited step forward, then masters himself, holding out his hand. “Come, Princess. Let’s go home.”

Hakuei frowns outright as she rises, hands curled at her sides rather than reaching out to take one of Kouen's. "Did word of King Sinbad's kindness towards me not reach Kou?" she coolly retorts as she steps down from the dais. "Or are you in such a foul mood that you would destroy his palace regardless of his actions?"

Kouen’s face tightens. This is not the reunion he had hoped for. “This action has nothing to do with your rescue. Sinbad’s actions do not dismiss the fact that we are at war, and this is an engagement. The first,” he says regaining his composure as he shifts to stand next to Judal’s floating form, “and the last. King Sinbad of the Seven Seas, surrender unto me your country, and your life.”

Sinbad’s eyes flicker to Judal. Really? You hate me this much? “Or?”

“Or my Magi will sink it into the ocean.”
"You're joking," Hakuei flatly butts in before another word can be shared, her eyes blazing as she stalks her way closer to Kouen. "You'd destroy an entire nation, force an honorable king from his throne when he has yet to lift a finger against us? Don't we have enough enemies already, Kouen?! Focus on them, not a nation that has never done a thing to us!"

"Yet," Judal mildly adds, his eyes lidded as he pulls out his wand again, languidly pointing it towards Sinbad. "Hey, stupid king. Did you know we've been having some nice talks with your pet snake lately? He's reeeally good for stories about what a coward you are." Ja'far's face is still impassive, but that's predictable enough (if not boring).

Sinbad shoots a look at Ja'far, eyes narrowing as he looks back at the pair. "You're lying to try and turn me against him. It won't work. I've never doubted the loyalty of my men, and I certainly won't based on your word."

Kouen laughs, stepping forward as if nothing would please him more. "You'll have your answer in a moment, self-appointed king. Which will it be, surrender yourself, or let all your people die?" He looks around the room, adding, "If any of you want to spare the innocent by delivering him, you're guaranteed a place of honor in my Empire."

"Are you even listening to me? En, what has gotten into you--" Hakuei fairly hisses, reaching out to grab his arm.

It's actually rather casual in how quickly she's cut off by the lump of Sinbad's body suddenly bound and tossed at Kouen's feet, and Judal exhales a slow whistle, immensely entertained. "Getting slack there, Sinbad."

The look Ja'far tosses him is ice cold. "While he certainly does have a tendency to be a lazy bastard, him being slack has nothing to do with it." A yank on his wires tightens them effectively as he steps fully down from the throne, eyebrows raised towards Kouen. "Spare yourself the hassle of any of these idiots. They'll never be loyal to you, and I can hardly recommend endangering your family by having them within your palace walls."

Even if he'd known it was coming, Sinbad hadn't been quite prepared for the sudden spinning of the world and hard thud of his landing on his face. Immediately, he regrets the plan of not telling the other generals as he hears chairs scrape against the floor, enraged shouts, and more bodies hit the floor. Please, don't let any of them seriously wound each other.

"You traitor!" he hears Sharrkan spit, shocked horror in every syllable. "I trusted you, Sin trusted you, and this is how you repay him? I'll kill you for that!"
Kouen moves, grabbing Hakuei by the arm, pulling her close and hissing, “I did him a favor. If I could end every war with no blood shed, I would, no matter what threats I have to use!”

“So you'll reduce him to this? What do you plan on doing to him?!” Hakuei demands, shoving Kouen's hand from her arm as she glares up at him. "If you want control of his country, fine, but work with him, no matter your ideals about there only needing to be one king!"

Between the lover's spat and the veritable bloodbath—ah, well, actually, Ja'far is pretty good about keeping it clean, which is a little disappointing—Judal feels like he should have something to snack on while he watches. His head tilts, following the line of the Heliohapt guy's body when he's catapulted back into a wall, and how quickly, how effectively their 'genius' magician is cut short of casting a spell with her staff ripped away by a loop of wire. "Still think we're lying, Sinbad?" he purrs, stepping down from the air to poke at Sinbad with his foot. "I was right, though. You do look good tied up."

The look Sinbad gives Judal is supposed to be furious, but there’s a sad note to it, something plaintive, wanting desperately not to believe, before he grits his teeth and asks, “As your lady says, General. What do you intend to do with me?”

“I would have you executed with full honors on the steps of my palace,” Kouen says, a little irritable as he releases Hakuei’s arm. “However, in exchange for his aid, you are instead to be a present to Judal. If he can manage to restrain you to my satisfaction the entire way back to Kou, that is.”

"It's not like it's gonna be very hard, he looks a little depressed," Judal sighs, reaching down to yank Sinbad up by a hand in his hair. "Ahh, you took your earrings off for a change. I wanted to pull on them--"

The pointed thud of the dragon-thing crashing back into that-really-tall-one and subsequently out a window is enough to make Judal pause and blink, watching with a tilt of his head. "Huh."

Ja'far huffs out a breath, brushing off his robes and reaching for his keffiyeh that fell off in the struggle. "Prince Kouen, would you have me stay here, or accompany you to Kou?"

“That,” Kouen says with a smile, watching Judal already playing with his new pet, “depends on you. You’ve served me well, take your choice. Stay, and be my General in charge of the disposition and affairs of Sindria, or accompany me home to Kou, and be my advisor and right hand.” Mei can be the left for a change. A change is a good thing.
For some reason, the thought of Ja’far as Kouen’s advisor bothers him more than the thought of being apart from the other man for however long, and he struggles newly against the wires, trying to get around to look into Ja’far’s eyes, but he’s bound too tightly.

It's a little sad how well all of this went along the lines of their plan, and Ja'far lets himself smile. "I'm honored, my lord, to be offered such a position. That being said, perhaps it would be best for me to stay here, at least for a week or so. Sindria's people can be quite unruly."

"Ahh, untie him, he's not going anywhere," Judal interrupts, and with a shrug, Ja'far yanks on the wires in question, unraveling them in short order from Sinbad's form. "Better--hey, Sinbad," he murmurs, reaching down to slide a hand along the heavy thrum of his pulse. "I know a surefire way to make you behave."

"… Of course, should you need me within the next few days," Ja'far dryly continues, disguising his disgust regarding Judal with a roll of his eyes, "you need only send word, and I will go to your side."

How unfortunate, that everyone would know something was wrong if he didn’t fight back.

Sinbad wants to be taken captive, needs to get to Kou in their trust, but Kouen isn’t stupid. He knows how powerful Sinbad is, knows how proud he is, and there’s no way, if he doesn’t fight, the little niggling seed of doubt won’t be planted.

And if it works, well, he won’t be as angry as Ja’far probably will.

“Dwell in my body, Baal!”

"Oh, really obnoxious, stupid king--"

Judal hadn't quite wanted to do this so soon, but he and Kouen have a deal. If Sinbad harms anyone--god help him if it's Hakuei, for one reason or another--so much for their agreement. He's fairly certain he hasn't had a reason to be so fast or precise in his summonings in awhile, and ah, how fortune it is that this is an island, and so pulling water from the air is an effortless thing, twisting it into ice something else entirely, and it's in short order that it slams into both of Sinbad's shoulders, throwing him back and pinning him to his throne.
"Doing things like that," Judal cheerfully says, his feet touching the ground finally as he stalks his way over, "makes me want to keep you anymore. Ah, though," he sighs, the tip of his wand nudging against Sinbad's throat, the sharpened point of it dragging along his pulse, "I really hate that we can't have fun like this for now."

Reaching out a hand, he rips the sword from Sinbad's hip, sending it clattering to the ground several feet away. "Do you know that Al-Sarmen would kill for a chance to experiment on someone like you? With so much magoi… they've never tried sealing someone like that."

Sinbad can feel his own blood running in a hot, steady pulse down his skin, and takes a deep, shuddering breath. "Stay back," he snarls to the rest of his generals, some of whom are even now struggling against Ja'far's manipulation. "I can handle this." He looks up into Judal's face, clenching his jaw against the pain. "You think you can keep me docile all the way to Kou?" he asks between gritted teeth. "Let's find out."

"There, that wasn't so difficult, was it?" Kouen asks with a smile, stepping onto the carpet. "Come, Hakuei. Judal, bring your new pet. Ja'far… I'll see you soon."

"Oh," Judal breathes, his eyes lidding, "I know I can."

The ice melts away, but as quickly as it does, his wand digs into the open wound of one shoulder, the pulse of his own rukh dragging through Sinbad's veins. It isn't what Al-Sarmen does--not at all, but no one has to know that. Instead, it's less a seal, more a temporary block, at least until he wins and gets to keep the man permanently.

It certainly must feel pretty bad, though.

"There." Yanking his wand away, Judal curls his fingers into the metal vessels about Sinbad's neck as well--about his wrists--rings, too, all yanked off and tossed aside. "Here, Freckles, you can clean that mess up and put it into safe keeping. C'mon, Sinbad, don't make me have him tie you up again."

This--this sudden loss of power, the feeling that even if he had his metal vessels, even if he had his hands free and he weren't bleeding freely, he could do nothing--is more than Sinbad had expected. He'd considered the possibility, but he hadn't expected it so soon, or for it to feel so final, not like this is a plan at all. Sinbad stumbles after Judal, face gone gray from the shock and pain, only barely remembering that this is what he wants. He has just enough time to get a last glimpse of Ja'far, standing resolute and firm, and his generals, watching in horrified, grief-stricken disbelief, before the
carpet rises from his ruined palace and soars over the sea.

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Judal *thinks* he's keeping up his end of the bargain.

At least, he's caught Sinbad every time he's even *thought* of doing something at this point, and Kouen hasn't *killed* him yet. It hasn't quite been a week, though, so there's still a pair of days for him to stress over, and god, if Sinbad isn't *annoying*.

Honestly, though, it'd be boring if he was an entirely well-behaved *pet*.

Actually, the term in and of itself is annoying, and Judal doesn't know why. It was *his* suggestion, after all, to make this happen. Maybe it would have been more fun to kill Sinbad after all, but that makes him anxious as well, the more he thinks about it. Mostly, Judal finds himself pouting, more than slightly annoyed that Sinbad isn't immediately doing as he says (and sort of finding that fun all the same, so it's all just… *weird*, when he really doesn't want *Kouen* to kill Sinbad, at least)—

He leaves Sinbad chained to the foot of his bed for awhile, and it's not for an hour or so before he comes back, sleepily crawling into the bed and glowering down at the once-was-king. "You know, I told you lots. If you'd be *good*, just for a few more days, then Kouen won't kill you. At least, not outright."

“But I am being good.”

Sinbad’s voice is flat. This has been a lot more difficult than he’d anticipated, and he can’t keep his mind off of what’s happening to his subjects, what’s happening to his friends, whether they believe him dead or in the hands of an enemy, whether they think he’s a weak, pathetic excuse for a king, whether he’ll have the strength to put that box in Judal’s hand.

After this last few days, that’s been less and less of a question.

It’s one thing, to only see Judal when he’s interested, to see him when he flits over to poke and prod at him. It’s another to see his petty little cruelties day by day, see him lording every bit of power he has over those below him, and his almost childlike innocence and glee about it.
It’s enough to make Sinbad want to stop trying.

The injuries Judal deals him hurt more when he doesn’t have his magoi, and his goal is to go to Kou in any case. Today, feigning an escape attempt just to be punished, just to look more convincing doesn’t sound very appealing, and he spends the day slumped where he’s chained at the foot of the bed, thinking of home. He rattles his chains listlessly when Judal comes in. “See?”

"But if you were good in the first place, I wouldn't have to chain you up," Judal sighs, rolling around until he's on his stomach, chin in his hands as he watches Sinbad through lidded eyes. He's really boring like this. It makes him regret, sort of, that bit of his own magoi keeping Sinbad's at bay. "I'll unchain you tonight if you want to come up here and pet me."

“Pet you?” Sinbad asks dully. It’s suppertime, and this is the time of year when there would be feasts, parties in Sindria, people laughing and dancing and playing games at all hours of the day. Instead, he’s here. “You’re the one in charge, aren’t you? You’re hardly my pet.”

Judal frowns at him, annoyed, and his feet kick slowly back and forth. "So? Normally, you like petting me."

“Even you must realize this isn’t normal,” Sinbad says dryly, rattling his chains again. He shifts, curling his knees up to his chest. “I don’t have as much energy as I did before. Forgive me if it takes some time to adjust.” He feels cold all the time now, cut off and alone, as if his connection from the world itself has been severed.

"It's just until the week is up," Judal bargains, scooting forward until his arms dangle over the foot of the bed, grabbing for Sinbad's hair. "Just so you're good. If you're good more often, maybe I'll take it off. Maybe."

Sinbad sags against the touch. “You’d be a fool to take it off me,” he says mildly, even as he shivers a bit under the touch. “You know that. Your masters must have told you that much.”

A little shrug follows, and Judal weaves his fingers through Sinbad's ponytail, lightly tugging. "You're not the same," he matter-of-factly replies. "Really boring, but mostly, you don't make the kind of face I like… and I can't watch it. The way the magoi overflows, I mean. Only yours and En's does that."
“I’m tired,” Sinbad says wearily. He’s more than that, he’s preoccupied thinking of the people he loves, the ones he doesn’t know if he’ll ever see again, and this is one of the situations he’s been least confident about getting out of alive. “What’s the point in fighting if I just know I’m going to lose?” It’s as good an excuse as any, even if the words are sour on his tongue.

"… You really are awful like this," Judal sniffs, and he slides off the end of the bed to flop himself down next to Sinbad. "Okay. Come on, lay your head in my lap or whatever, I guess I'll pet you or comb your hair or something even though I'm pretty sure this is supposed to be opposite."

Sinbad considers refusing, but….

Well, it’s been a difficult few days, and it’s not like anyone can see him.

He scoots over, letting out a sigh as he lays his head on Judal’s lap. “Tired of fighting you anyway,” he mutters. “I don’t like hurting you.”

At that, Judal snorts, and promptly drops a hand to the side of Sinbad's head, tucking a strand of his hair behind one ear. "You do a shitty job of hurting me. Mostly just annoying, like fleabites, with or without your magoi."

“Because I don’t like,” Sinbad says quietly. It does feel nice, Judal touching him like that, and he closes his eyes, leaning into the touch. “I don’t like seeing you cry out in pain. The look on your face….I hate it.”

"You're being really weird tonight," Judal sighs, his gaze sliding upward as he half-heartedly starts finger-combing Sinbad's hair. "You look good when you're in pain, at least. But you always look good, so I guess that doesn't count."

"You look best when you're in my arms." Sinbad doesn’t care if it’s a sappy, silly thing to say. It’s true, and right now, it just makes him a little sad to think that he’ll probably never take Judal like that again. “Not the kind of thing a slave should say, probably.”

"… Seriously, what's with you?” Judal grumbles, giving Sinbad's hair a little tug for good measure. It shouldn't make his stomach twist and flutter when Sinbad says those sorts of things—it's the sort of thing that gets Kougyoku going, dammit, not him. It's a lot better like this, with Sinbad as his pet, poetic justice for the man that would never let himself be chosen as a proper king. "Do you think saying that sort of stuff now is gonna make me take your collar off?"
“I doubt it,” Sinbad says with a bit of a shrug. “You’ve already made your decision, right? This is what you want from me.”

"You made your decision," is the irritable retort to follow. "I asked you to be my king first, you know."

“I know. I was there.” Sinbad twists around to look up, keeping the insolence out of his face, letting the weariness shine through. It’s hardly an act, not when he feels so downtrodden. “If there’s some other behavior you’d prefer from me, you should tell me what it is….Master.”

"Fucking quit it," Judal mutters, dropping a hand over Sinbad’s eyes so the puppy dog effect isn't quite so strong. "It's not even good when you call me that, not right now."

Sinbad relaxes down onto Judal’s lap. “Whatever you say. It isn’t as if I can make decisions for myself anymore. I’m only here to be yours and follow your orders, right? Isn’t that what you want?”

"I just don't want him to kill you, dumbass."

It's the absolute worst thing to blurt out, but he's frustrated, he's annoyed, and Sinbad is the worst, causing both of those things all at once. Judal snorts, shoving the man out of his lap and making to haul himself back onto the bed. "You're so irritating, though, that I think I should just let him."

Sinbad rocks back on his knees, raising an eyebrow. “You look good like that,” he murmurs, ignoring the conversation in favor of the way Judal looks on the bed. “I’d love to pin you down to the bed right now, it’s been too long since I’ve tasted you. And if you’re going to let Kouen kill me, I won’t have many more chances.”

The sole of one foot solidly connects with Sinbad's forehead--not kicking, but certainly pushing in vague irritation as Judal scowls. "Since when would you love to do something and not do it? Don't give me the slave crap, you're an awful one and you were trying just yesterday to make a run for it, besides."

Sinbad snorts, and rattles his chains pointedly. “If you wanted me in your bed,” he says with a half-shrug, “you’d have taken these off.” He sags down to the floor, sighing out through his nose. Maybe the other generals will get past Ja’far, and someone will come get him. At this point, he’d prefer being rescued and the plan being ruined to having to deal with Judal being as petty and cruel as
Ja’far had always said. He *hates* being proven wrong about the people he likes.

There’s a little, nearly audible moment of hesitation before a flicker of magic brings the manacles about Sinbad’s wrists and neck to open. It isn’t as if Sinbad has his magoi; he can’t *do* anything with that in mind, he’s just a normal human—at least, that’s what Judal tells himself no matter how he starts to worry. "I might kill you if you do something dumb," he mutters crossly, looking aside. This is a dozen headaches and then some, for all the reasons it *shouldn’t* be. God, kings are dumb.

Sinbad looks up, and Judal looks more like a child than anything, lost, confused, annoyed. Even without his magoi, the feeling of release from the chains is good enough, and he moves up to the bed without a second’s pause, forcing Judal’s wrists over his head, covering the younger man with his body, nipping at his neck. “Don’t think so low of yourself,” he breathes against soft skin. “You don’t need chains when there’s nowhere I’d rather be than here.”

Judal’s eyes flash at that. "Don't lie," he flatly retorts, his fingers flexing even though he makes no attempt to pull his arms away. "You don't want to be here, you want to be back in Sindria." *With your snake, even though he's a traitor and a liar.*

“If that’s what you want me to say,” Sinbad says, sliding a strong thigh up between Judal’s legs, pressing up hard. “I’ll say whatever you like. Though I thought you’d enjoy ordering me around more with other things.”

"You're... giving me a headache,” is the groan to follow. It’s *difficult* not to be distracted by the easy strength behind everything that Sinbad does, and Judal bites down into his own lower lip, wriggling down against the slide of Sinbad's thigh no matter how he still refuses to look at him. "I just told you-this isn't--I don't *really*... ugh, can you just shut *up*? Or I'll give you to Kouen for *real*, he'd have some ideas about how to *order you*--"

Sinbad has no interest in being owned by Kouen, and brushes a hand under Judal’s chin instead, leaning down to kiss him firmly, deeply, tasting the lips he’s *missed.* “What do you want, then?” he breathes, nipping at that full lower lip even as he slides a hand down, rubbing a thumb over one nipple. “Silence?” He says nothing as he strips Judal of his trousers, running long fingers over the swollen length of him, squeezing and tugging in a low, slow motion.

"N-not--" The words catch in his throat, bubbling out instead as a heady whine as Judal lurches up, legs splaying wide as he grinds himself up into Sinbad's hand. Impossible not to, when no one quite touches him like Sinbad does, or seems to know how *well* to make him squirm, and Judal huffs out a hot, ragged breath, eyes lidded and dark as he nibbles his own lower lip for a lingering taste of the other man there. "Not that," he manages to rasp. "I… I don't want it to be any *different.*"
“But it is different.” It will do neither of them any good, if Sinbad forgets why he’s here, that there’s a time limit, and he pauses, straddling Judal’s legs. “You took my country from me,” he murmurs, leaning down and dealing a sharp bite to Judal’s shoulder. “You took my freedom. You took my people. You left me with nothing but my life.” He looks up, eyes serious as he meets Judal’s eyes. “That changes things.”

He takes it back—he should have agreed on silence. A put out groan, and Judal sags back into the bed, huffing out a breath. "I offered to let you be my king--you could have still had everything, we could have, and even more than that," he insists. "But you don't want me."

“You’re wrong.” Sinbad is quiet as he speaks, slow, measured. Just that, and he leans down to pin Judal into the bed, using all his weight as leverage, holding him immobile no matter how he wriggles and writhes. What you offered me was a life of servitude to my greatest enemy. Had you been free, were you free now, you’d be mine in a second. He slides two fingers past Judal’s lips, into his mouth as he leans down to suck on the Magi’s ear.

There’s a protest on his lips, but it’s quickly muffled all the same, and Judal's brow furrows in a pout, not quite getting what he's so wrong about. His cheeks hollow all the same, a slow shiver sliding down his spine as he sucks, tongue dragging against Sinbad's fingers with a groan swallowed down his throat. If you wanted me, you'd just have me already.

Sinbad runs his hands down Judal’s sides, cupping his ass as he lifts, nibbling gently at Judal’s neck as he leans down, hungry. tasting. “You always taste so good,” he murmurs. “Even when you’ve got my blood on you, you taste so good.” How is that, Judal? Is it the rukh in you, or the expensive sheets you roll around in when you're not tormenting me?

A rumbling growl escapes at that, a pointed wriggle and a grabbing hand attempting to drag Sinbad closer. "Bite,” Judal breathlessly demands, and lets his head fall back as he says it, lips parting with his next, shuddering exhale. "If you're gonna eat me, at least leave marks."

Sinbad grins, and rumbles low in his chest, “Yes, Master.” He bends, sinking his teeth into Judal’s neck and shoulder, rough hands spreading Judal’s legs hard in contrast to the falsely subservient tone of his voice. “You know,” he murmurs, rubbing slowly against Judal’s ass, “it would be wrong of me to do anything you didn’t order me to do. I’d be a bad, disobedient slave.”

That shouldn’t go straight to his cock as much as it does, shouldn't make him whine--no, that's the biting, Judal tells himself, the sink of Sinbad's teeth into his flesh that'll leave marks and leaves his eyes fluttering as he arches down, grinding his cock against whatever part of Sinbad that he can. "You've been nothing but a horrible slave," he gasps, his eyes rolling back as he fists his fingers tightly into Sinbad's hair, pulling hard. He's definitely whiny now, sounding far less like a master, far more like a harlot--or so Kouen would probably say. "God, I miss your cock though--"
Sinbad grabs Judal’s hand, sliding it down his own stomach and the hard, smooth muscle there, dragging it down to hiss as it presses against his cock. “Right here,” he breathes. “Hard and ready for you. What should I do with it, Master?”

He can’t even tell anymore, whether he’s doing it to make some kind of a point to Judal (though he’s getting a little fuzzier on the details with every repetition) or because it sounds sort of sinful on his lips, the kind of thing he’s never said to a man in more than jest. Either way, he’s more than hard.

It’s a little more than weird how that makes him flush hot, especially considering he's the one normally pandering, simpering, calling someone 'master' to get off, but it doesn't sound quite the same coming from Sinbad's lips, and he's still on his back besides, spreading his legs like a whore and eagerly curling his fingers around Sinbad's cock, mouth falling open with a ragged, heady breath at how hard, how thick it feels in his grasp.

How long has it been? Too long, if he's about to just come from thinking about that big cock inside of him, fucking him like no one else does. Judal swallows hard, his eyes fluttering as he gives Sinbad's cock another squeeze. "In me," he pants out, twisting, fumbling to grab for oil kept at his beside. "Just--fuck me, I need it--"

“You need it?” Sinbad can’t resist it a little, toying with the boy, resisting the urge to roll over and just let Judal have his way. The allure of it is strong, remembering the feeling of Judal inside him, and god, only the way Judal writhes is enough to keep him from begging for it. He grabs at Judal’s hand, stroking an oil-slick palm up his cock and making sure he’s wet and dripping. “You’re in charge, aren’t you? Maybe you should… make me.”

His actions bely his words, and he can’t wait for Judal to tell him, can’t wait for Judal to grab needy and hungry at him, can’t even wait for a response, and he spreads Judal’s thighs wide, a little growl of hunger coming from his throat as he shoves in hard.

Judal thinks he shrieks, knows he claws stripes down Sinbad's back as he arches up, clings to him as he wriggles down against Sinbad's cock as much as it's shoved up into him, the thick stretch of it making sweat bead on his brow, his mouth fall open, his nails flex in that much harder when he whines and whimpers and shudders hard as he's stuffed so full.

His thighs tremble before falling open helplessly, the sensation of weakness that rakes up his spine making it almost impossible to even squirm when Sinbad is so deep inside of him. "J-just… please," he mindlessly tries instead, huffing out hot, ragged breaths as he pulls at Sinbad's hair, "please, fuck me hard--"
“I like it,” Sinbad groans, hiking Judal’s legs up. “when you ask nicely.” The pain in his back is nothing, nothing but fuel for the hardening of his cock when he shoves in hard, makes Judal buck and writhe and scream, and all Sinbad can think is that the tent walls are thin, that everyone in Kouen’s camp is going to hear. “Better be careful,” he growls, nipping hard at Judal’s neck as he rolls his hips, slapping hard against Judal’s. “Everyone is going to hear the great Magi being fucked on his back by a slave.”

"Good," is the broken moan to follow, Judal’s eyes fluttering helplessly as he ruts down, biting his lip at the next deep slide of Sinbad’s cock that makes him clench down even harder. His hands fist white-knuckled into Sinbad’s hair, yanking with every thrust, as if that vents some of the tension that makes his toes and feet curl until his legs cramp. "T-they've heard worse anyway, s-so don't stop making me scream--"

Sinbad yanks out, flipping Judal over, pinning his hands to the bed over his head as he slams back inside as hard as he can, knowing just where to hit the younger man to make him scream. He knows that much, at least, even if he doesn’t know how to bring Judal back from the dangerous precipice he’s on. It doesn’t matter right now, not when he wants so badly, when he’s buried in something so tight, so sweet, clenching around him as Judal sobs and bucks. “Then let them hear,” he grunts. “Scream my name.”

This is definitely, definitely not what Kouen probably expects him to do with a king-turned-slave, but oh, god, when Sinbad feels this good, what the hell else is he supposed to do?

Judal definitely screams, no matter that it's more broken, helpless noises than any actual name as he sobs into the blankets, rubbing his flushed face down into them as his legs shake and his back arches, desperately trying to press back, to grind into that perfect, aching press of Sinbad's cock. His knees slide even further apart, and he chokes on his own breath as that just seems to make Sinbad feel even bigger inside of him when he shoves in deep. It almost hurts, almost, and that just makes his vision swim even more, tears pricking his eyes when he comes with a ragged groan, without a single touch to his cock as he spills, twitching and wriggling and desperate to feel all of Sinbad inside of him even as he spills onto his bed.

Sinbad bites down hard, bent over Judal’s back, slamming deep inside as he spills, tasting blood as his hips crash against Judal’s. “Good,” he breathes, hips jerking a few more times as he slows, nipping at the Magi’s ear. “Good, good. Love the way you feel around me.”

The tent flap opens, a shadow falling across the ground as one of Kouen’s soldiers stands at attention. “Sir,” he says, jaw clenched as he determinedly stares straight ahead, “General Kouen sent me to make certain you weren’t being injured.”
Judal just has to laugh, breathless and more than a little hoarse around the edges as he makes no attempt to untangle himself from Sinbad, his face still pressed inelegantly to the sheets. "Y-yeah. Tell him I'm dead," he dryly tosses over his shoulder. "Get the fuck out, does it look like I'm injured?"

Sinbad laughs against Judal’s skin, nuzzling his cheek against his shoulderblade as the soldier hastens from the tent, face bright red. “You might want to take his advice. You’re bleeding, a bit.”

A snort follows that, and Judal wriggles his fingers. "So are you," he notes from the bits of red underneath his fingernails. "Feels good, though. Kouen's so nosy. If I wanna have sex with you, that's my business, not his. You're mine, anyway."

“He gave me to you, didn’t you say?” Sinbad murmurs, stretching out on top of Judal with a grin. “He had to assume something like this would happen. Unless he doesn’t know you at all.”

"Mmn." Judal flops down underneath Sinbad's weight, making no attempt to rise and liking the press of him, all the same. "He expects you to do something so he can kill you once and for all. But…" His brow furrows, a frown on his lips. "I really don't want him to. It was hard enough to get him to agree to this. I mean, if anyone gets to kill you, it's me, anyway."

“Will you be upset?” Sinbad asks, brushing his lips across Judal’s shoulder. “If I don’t give you a reason to kill me, and you have to keep me around?” He runs a finger through Judal’s hair, working his hand up to scratch Judal’s scalp gently. “You’ll get bored of me, if I don’t.”

"… You're kind of an awful slave," Judal admits, his eyes lidding and head flopping forward back into the sheets, eyes lidded in obvious, open approval of Sinbad's petting. "And boring, when you don't have your magoi. He'd really kill you, if I gave it back. But I'd keep you either way."

Sinbad laughs gently, petting Judal obediently, kissing along the shell of his ear and curling his other arm around his waist. “You don’t seem very frightened of him. Tell me...would you really have sunk my country, people and all?”

Judal snorts. "Why should I be frightened of him? I'm a Magi, he's the one that begs me to raise dungeons for him." He wriggles back, thinking. "But sinking islands--that sounds like a lot of work. I really didn't want to, because I'd be really tired afterwards. Also, I like Sindria's markets."

“That would have humiliated him,” Sinbad muses, more than a little amused at he thought. “To have come all that way, and have no plan other than your cooperation, if he’d not gotten it. He’d have
looked like quite a fool, if Ja’far hadn’t betrayed me.” Even saying the words and knowing they’re lies, the taste of them is sour.

"… He would've been really mad." And gotten Al-Sarmen after me, for sure. Judal twitches a bit at the thought before shoving it aside. "Your snake's been chatting it up with En for weeks now, you know. I thought you would've known already, but I guess not."

The best lie, Sinbad knows well, is the truth. “Of course I knew he was talking to Kouen. I’m not so incompetent a king. I just…” Sinbad shrugs, burying his face in Judal’s shoulder. “That’s the problem with double agents. It’s hard to tell who the real sucker is until they jump.”

"I toooold you he was no good, but you didn't listen to me," Judal sighs out, stretching against Sinbad with a pointed wriggle backwards. "And now you get to watch Kouen paw all over him when he finally shows up. Really gross, but En has weird taste sometimes. So do you."

Sinbad grunts out a sour response. “You should ask your precious En to let you have him, too. Or don’t you think he’d listen to you?”

"Ew, why would I want him?” Judal makes a face before buying it down into a pillow. "Definitely don't want. Besides, En wants to keep him all to himself, and I don't care as long as I have you."

“You’ll keep me all to yourself, won’t you?” Sinbad asks, closing his eyes as he nestles up behind Judal, curling around his back. “If this is to be my life, I’d want it only to be you.”

It’s probably not a good idea to bring up some of the stuff he and Kouen got off to, is it? "… I don't like sharing. You're a liar, though, you'd like being some girl's pet."

Who says I’m not? “Maybe to play at,” Sinbad says instead, pressing an open-mouthed kiss, then another, to the back of Judal’s neck. “But for this…do you really think I couldn’t escape you? If I loathed this so much?”

Judas immediately pouts at that. "I'm a Magi, you know. You've never even seen my full strength, and you don't have any of your magoi, or your metal vessels."

“It’s a compliment I’m paying you,” Sinbad says, a little amused. “Unless you would prefer for me to go sit by Kouen’s lap?” Have you realized it yet, Judal? How much more you've bitten off than you
"Don't be dumb. You'd regret that, you know," Judal says, twisting around to fake a bite towards Sinbad's jawline. "He threw me over his desk once, after talking about all the ways he wanted to treat you like a whore. Really gets him off."

That, admittedly, gives Sinbad pause. It's been years upon years since he's felt helpless in the face of someone's sexual advances, and the feeling isn't one he's ever wanted back. "In that case," he says slowly, curling his arms around Judal, "I'll have to be more well-behaved for you so you won't want to share me."

*I already don't,* Judal thinks, but flips over entirely all the same to wriggle close, nestling his face into the crook of Sinbad's neck. "*That* makes you wanna be well-behaved, not the threat of death? You're an idiot." Except he sort of gets it. Kouen can be... yeah, no sugarcoating—pretty damn awful to deal with.

"I don't fear death." Sinbad frowns, then adds, "I don't fear Kouen either, but the idea is...distasteful, to me. I wouldn't enjoy his company like I enjoy yours."

"Fair enough, he's really not your kind of guy," Judal sighs, setting his teeth to Sinbad's shoulder in an absent gnaw. "Also, his beard is stupid."

"I'd be careful who I said that to," Sinbad says in amused agreement, stroking his hand down Judal's shoulder. "I hear he's pretty touchy about that sort of thing. Princess Hakuei said something about that, during one of our suppers."

"Yeah, like hell I say it to his face... unless he's really made me mad." Judal wriggles, biting again for good measure. "They're still fighting, that's why he's in such a bad mood, so you really don't want to misbehave right now. Trust me."

"You think he would go back on his word?" Sinbad asks, shivering at the bites, though not in any sort of discomfort. "Careful, *Master,* keep doing that and your poor slave won't be able to help himself."

"It wouldn't be the first time he's done that." Hiding his grin against Sinbad's skin, Judal gives him another nibble before looking up *innocently* through his lashes. "Am I doing something to *bother* you?"
Sinbad grunts, shifting his hips to let Judal feel him hardening against the Magi’s hip. “Only if you don’t finish what you’re starting.” If Kouen does go back on his word, Sinbad can use that. Maybe it would be worth putting himself at the General’s mercy, just to see what it would do to the man’s relationship with Judal.

"And now my slave is making demands," Judal murmurs, reaching up to give Sinbad's hair a light tug as he squirms forward eagerly. "Kind of rude. Let's see how many other guards we can bring in here to check on me, hmm?"

Sinbad laughs against the Magi’s skin, mouthing hot kisses along his collarbone, down to his chest as he rolls over onto his back, hands at Judal’s waist. “You’re always so noisy when you ride me like this,” he says with a grin. It’s hard to remember that he’s a captive, there’s a plan, this isn’t just fun, when Judal is so wriggly and warm.

Judal would be lying if he ever said this wasn't one of his favorite things. Actually, anything with Sinbad is, but this… it's too easy to paw at his chest as he wriggles his way back, shivering at the feel of those big hands on his waist as he slides his ass against the hardening line of Sinbad's cock, biting his lip when the head of it catches against his still-slick hole. "What if," he breathes, his thumbs dragging over Sinbad's nipples, "I pierced these? Only slaves have that here."

Sinbad’s breath hitches as his hips twitch up, thumbs stroking into the soft skin of Judal’s waist. “What a heathen concept,” he murmurs, though his cock is no less hard for it, rubbing eagerly against the slick, dripping hole he can’t see from this angle, but ah, he can feel it well enough. “Are you that kind of master, then? Would you do it yourself, or have a professional do it?” The idea doesn’t bother him much, not after his youth in Partevia.

"Not sure if I'm that kind of master, but… I just think you'd look good with them," Judal admits with a grin, his eyes lidding as he wriggles back, hissing out a breath as the head of Sinbad's cock presses against him, promising that thick stretch that he loves so much. He just can't help but eagerly arch his hips back all the way, whining as the head sinks inside and the rest inch by hard inch, slick and hot and leaving him panting hard. "I'd… definitely… do it myself," he groans, his head pitching back, lips parting as he sinks down all the way, shoving himself back as he wriggles. "F-fuck, you always feel even bigger like this--"

Even if Sinbad vaguely remembers in the back of his mind that Ja’far’s told him something, something about how they’re dangerous to pierce by someone who doesn’t know what he’s doing, the idea makes him arch and hiss out a breath nonetheless. Judal’s always a little bad for him, a little dangerous. Ja’far doesn’t quite understand, but that’s all right. He arches up, sliding deep inside, not giving Judal a chance to get used to it as he hisses out a breath. “Good, good. You’re--ahh, clench down on me like that, let me hear you enjoying my cock.”
Judal whines and whimpers, sliding a hand back behind himself--better leverage to lean back that way, to arch his back as he squirms his way down, muscles squeezing tight before Sinbad even bids him to. "Really good," he pants out, eyes fluttering, and he can barely think as he rocks himself helplessly down, muscles bunching and twitching with each rock and slide of his hips. "Like it when you… ah… grab me… pull me down… feels so good--"

Sinbad doesn’t need instruction by his master to do that, hands bruising, dragging Judal down onto his cock, yanking him onto the long, deep thrusts of his hips with every motion, hands digging in so tight he can almost feel himself inside. “You look,” he breathes, eyes alight with the hunger of it all, “like it’s too much for you….but I bet you could take more.”

Eyes rolling back, Judal can do little but shove himself down harder, swallowing hard and gulping in sharp, desperate breaths when Sinbad slides in so deep that it almost hurts, that he feels himself twitch and cramp and ah, god, he can't breathe. "Always too much," he groans, eagerly squirming down all the same, far, far too eager to fuck himself on Sinbad's cock when the stretch of it is so good, when he’s so full. "D-don't think… you’d be able to fit anything else inside."

Sinbad’s hand squeezes around Judal’s waist as the other trails down behind, coming to rest on Judal’s parted thigh, stroking up the soft skin there. “I,” he says, voice catching as the tightness robs him of coherent thought, “could try.” He traces a finger around Judal’s hole, feeling the slickness, the leftover mess, the tense, taut stretch of Judal around him.

Judal's breath hiccups, his skin flushing hotter as his cock jumps, his back arches, and his thighs tremble with the tension that suddenly rakes through him. "D-do it," he hoarsely manages, even as he bites his lip at the reminder that Sinbad’s fingers aren't exactly small either. "I just--I want to be full of you--"

“It won’t be easy,” Sinbad warns breathlessly, and slowly, carefully works a finger inside, shuddering and bucking at the sudden tighter squeeze of Judal down around him. He doesn’t give Judal enough chance to adjust, wants to push him this time, and slides in another, teeth clenching at the reaction that goes through Judal’s body. “You feel nice and full now?”

The whine that tears from his throat is more reflexive than something he wills, and Judal sags, gulping in a hot, fast breath, his head tipping forward as his hips move in mindless, shallow little arcs back against Sinbad's cock and fingers. "Really… really full," he whimpers, tears pricking his eyes as his hands scrabble at Sinbad's chest for leverage, his legs too weak to give him the strength he needs to move. Full is an understatement, even; he aches, stuffed and stretched until it feels like he could never close his legs, and he shakes, swallowing hard with every little twitch of movement.
Almost nothing makes Sinbad as hard as seeing Judal writhing on his cock. Like this, when he’s beside himself, panting and begging and groaning for help, he nearly loses himself. “Come all over yourself,” he growls, hissing out a breath, shoving his fingers in hard alongside his cock and forgetting that he’s supposed to be the slave here. “Show me what a pretty slut you can be when I stuff you full.”

Nothing, nothing feels better than when Sinbad fucks him. The fingers are a bonus, stretching him wider than he ever thought he could be, and when they slide even deeper, there's no helping the way he shrieks, the way he wriggles and writhes and humps back against both his hand and his cock, sobbing out Sinbad's name. Judal can't quite hear the words that leave Sinbad's mouth over the thundering of his own pulse, but he's sure they're obscene, sure Sinbad's telling him how pretty he is, how slutty he is, and Judal can't even breathe when he comes, spilling with a jerk over Sinbad's stomach, his entire body drawn tight and trembling.

Sinbad can hear the stamp of booted feet outside the tent, and can’t even spare a laugh. He likes it, knowing that they’ll hear the precious Magi being fucked within an inch of his life, loving Sinbad’s cock loudly and obviously. The thought of that, of the fact that he’s made his master pant and writhe and beg, at seeing him utterly debauched and wrecked, is too much. Sinbad lurches up, slamming deep inside, watching the way Judal’s mouth falls open, and he doesn’t even know what words fall from his lips when he buries himself deep inside, coming hard with a harsh shout. He half-dazedly remembers to pull his fingers out, crushing Judal down against his chest.

Judal groans hazily as he nestles himself into Sinbad's chest, still shivering, still shaking hard as his face nuzzles thoughtlessly into the other man's neck. "Too muuuch," he whines, far from a complaint as he flops there, still twitching from his orgasm. "I can… god, I can feel it leaking out," he helplessly groans.

“You look good that way,” Sinbad says with a lazy, worn-out grin. His hands move to stroke Judal gently, petting him affectionately from the top of his head to the curve of his ass. “Did I finally break you?”

Judal's head slowly shakes. "Not broken," he mumbles. "Just… uggh, that was good." He butts his face against Sinbad's neck. "Do it again."

Sinbad laughs aloud, wrapping his arms tightly around the younger man, holding him close enough to feel the pulse of his heartbeat. It seems impossible, that he should have come on such an errand as he has, that even now he could be planning…

Sinbad swallows. Best not to think about that. He trails a finger down Judal’s spine, then squeezes his ass. “Like you like this. I like it when you feel helpless in my arms.”
"You're a good pillow," Judal sighs out, rubbing his cheek against Sinbad's shoulder. "Ima stay like this. Keeping you."

That probably shouldn’t sound as appealing as it does. Sinbad smiles, leaning up only to brush a kiss over Judal’s hairline before flopping back to the bed.

After all, there’s time for everything to go to hell later. No use in speeding up the process.
Chapter 10

Kouen watches.

Ja’far is a very good spy. He’d been such a good spy that after a decade, Sinbad hadn’t seen his betrayal coming.

In Kouen’s book, that’s far too good a spy.

A good spy is one you know is loyal, one you know is disloyal, one who has never wavered for you, one you’ve raised since infancy and would no more doubt than he’d doubt the movements of his own hand. There are no good spies. The closest he can come is a spy he knows is disloyal, one that he can fluster and own.

And he’s about to be an Emperor, besides. He can take his pleasure in such investigations if he pleases.

So when Ja’far dines at his table that first evening in Kou, Kouen isn’t subtle, and he doesn’t care. He sips his wine, sets it down, and says casually but firmly, “Share my bed this evening. I desire your company.”

Ja’far quite nearly spits out his own wine.

Honestly, he thinks himself very tolerant, especially for the past few weeks. After Sinbad’s ‘capture’, talking to and calming down all of the other generals—convincing them that it was all a ruse, and to continue it—actually took some effort, and a great deal of tolerance, especially when apparently he is so convincing that they truly thought he was a traitor. He’s been tolerant enough of the sight of Sinbad in chains, of Judal petting him like a dog, been tolerant of glares from Koumei that never quite seem to stop—

This, however, is a different sort of thing altogether.

"I… come again, my lord?" Ja’far manages.
Kouen narrows his eyes. “I had thought you quicker in understanding,” he says, not terribly far from annoyance. “I mean to make no great conquest of it. You are my man now, are you not? I want you in my bed tonight. And in case you fear a misunderstanding, I mean to spread your legs.” He raises a glass, murmuring over it, “Unless you mean to refuse me.”

And this is the problem with ‘royalty’ like Kouen--they really are born and raised to think they’re entitled to things like this. Ja’far sucks in a slow, calming breath, attempting to think of a dozen excuses, none of which he know will work, and then the possible effects of refusing and making Kouen angry, on top of that.

"Not that," he carefully replies, willing his hand not to shake when he sits his cup down. "More… ah… I doubt you will be as pleased with my company as you think. Whatever Judal has been telling you is a far cry from the truth."

Kouen’s mouth quirks at the side. “You needn’t concern yourself with that. I’m well accustomed to making my own pleasure, no matter the inexperience of my bedmate. Or their willingness, if it comes to that.”

It’s not necessarily a threat he likes making. His voice is more firm than threatening, but there’s no note of flexibility in it. “I’ll be ready for you when the evening bell chimes. Make certain you’re clean, yes?”

Ja’far strangles a last attempt at a protest in the back of his throat. He'll never understand why sex need be a thing that happens at all, let alone some attempt at possession, or power play, or… whatever it is that men seem to gather from this stupidity. "Yes," he weakly agrees, and tries very hard not to chug back the last of his wine.

There is always the option of just not showing up.

Never mind that it would ruin all of their plans, that it would undoubtedly get Sinbad killed, Sindria sunk into the sea once and for all—no, he isn't allowed to be that selfish, no matter how he wants to be when he stands outside of Kouen’s chambers and hesitates for a good minute before knocking.

It’s no servant, but Kouen himself who opens the door, in just a loose robe open to the waist. He looks Ja’far up and down, an eyebrow raised in appreciation. “Good. You look as good at my door as I’d expected. Let’s see how you look on your back, shall we?”
Even saying such things is enough to make him strain a bit against the fabric over his groin, shutting the door with a final click behind Ja'far as he tips a pitcher into a goblet. “Do you care for spirits of wine? I take honey in them, but you need not.”

Ja'far wills his face not to flame to no avail, and a dozen excuses come to the tip of his tongue again before he swallows them all down once more. "No, thank you.” Mostly because I am afraid I'll down the whole pitcher at this rate.

Suddenly, he's annoyed at the cut of Kou clothing, and especially judging by how Kou's eyes rake over him, he's less annoyed and more appreciative—all too similar to how Sinbad would be, if something was pulled tight about his waist, accentuating hips and thighs and ugh, Ja'far also can't recall a time he's been more annoyed at how he himself was made. "… I'll admit, my lord, I hardly expected you to be interested in someone like me," Don't you have a dozen concubines or something to play with? Ja'far is fairly certain this isn't part of the 'advisor' job description (even if Sinbad would try and tell him otherwise, but that doesn't count).

“Someone like you?” Kouen folds his arms over his chest, openly admiring. “I take my pleasure in what takes my interest, little spy. Be pleased you’ve captured my eye, I don’t choose bed partners indiscriminately.” He reaches out, brushing his fingers over Ja’far’s wrist, sliding them slow and sure up the soft skin of one arm, moving to brush a thumb over Ja’far’s neck. Examining the man’s loyalty is all well and good, but Kouen finds he’s suddenly less interested in such things and a great deal more interested in what would make Ja’far blush, what would make his breath hitch, what Kouen would have to do to hear his name panted out against the fine silk of his sheets. “And your own pleasure? Where do you usually take such a thing, and with whom?”

"I'm honored," Ja'far somehow manages without sounding sarcastic. Instead, it's more anxious than anything, which he supposes is better than the former, especially when coupled with the nervous twitch of his skin underneath Kouen's touch, the hard thud of his pulse underneath the brush of that thumb. Honesty, in this case, is probably the best policy, lest he dig this grave even deeper with a dozen incorrect expectations. "… This sort of thing… is something I enjoy far from often, my lord, and only with Sinbad, at that."

At least you’re intelligent enough not to try to hide such things from me. Or did you simply know I’d have heard about your dalliances from others? “Well enough, he shares many tastes with me.” He loosens the sash about his waist, enjoying too much the flutter of the spy’s pulse. “I’ve said I want you on your back. Make yourself comfortable on the bed, I would see what’s under those borrowed robes.” He’ll have to be plain and direct with this one, that’s obvious, and the best solution with a man who turns a phrase for a living.

Nothing so good as to warrant this, so turn back now and leave me be, Ja'far miserably thinks, even
as he sucks in a steadying breath and turns away to do as he's told. It's annoying that his mind wants to immediately compare Kouen's bed to Sinbad's, considering the luxury of it, and more annoying still is the shake of his hand when he reaches to loosen the ties of his own robes--not too much, Kouen probably wants to do that himself, though it's certainly enough to send them slinking down his shoulders, while reflex keeps his knees firmly pressed together.

That little tremble of Ja'far’s hand sends a spark of heat to pool in Kouen’s abdomen, and he follows Ja'far down to the bed, sliding his hands up to the insides of the spy’s thighs, squeezing to feel the curve, the swell of them. “So soft,” he murmurs appreciatively. “Look at you, you have a virgin girl’s legs, all fat and demure, like you’re untouched still. Do you like the feel of a man between your thighs, my little spy?”

The whimper that dares well in his throat is impossible to strangle back, especially when Kouen's hands slide up his legs like he owns them, like he's actually allowed to do that and damn it, his skin should be crawling, not twitching and heating underneath that touch. It's because it's stupidly familiar, because Kouen's hands aren't so different than Sinbad's, and Ja'far mentally curses all of this a dozen times over. "I… I'm really not one to think on it often, my lord," he mutters, heat spreading from his cheeks down to his neck as he sinks back onto his elbows with another, tense shiver.

Kouen’s touch turns a bit rougher, taking liberties where he sees chances, wanting to make this man his, to own him in every sense of the word. He yanks those pale thighs apart, laying between them and letting Ja’far feel the hard length of him in return. “If you don’t think on such things, my little blushing maiden,” he purrs in delight, bruising up pale skin quite on purpose, “you have no preference as to whether I take you fast or slow?”

That makes him flush hotter still, and makes it a bit more difficult to bite his tongue. "I'm hardly a maiden," Ja'far mutters as he squirms, fingers nearly white-knuckled as he curls them into the sheets. His teeth sink into his lower lip, refusing to let himself squeak and wriggle with every damned grab that's just shy of too-rough. "You seem to have enough ideas about what you want to do with me already, my lord."

Kouen draws back, propping himself up on his forearms as he looks down at Ja’far’s blushing, demure face. Perhaps not demure, perhaps more full of anger and humiliation, but it’s a blush nonetheless. “You have been here but lately,” he murmurs, leaning down to bare one shoulder, then nip at the skin he uncovers. “You won’t have heard all the rumors, so I’ll give you this one for free.” He leans down, breath hot against Ja’far’s ear as he whispers, “I don’t like it when the one I bed just lays there like a dead fish. Show me what you like, or I’ll make you writhe in other ways.”

Ja'far supposes he should be grateful that he's been given a warning.

Except he isn't. He'd almost rather Kouen shove him down and finish this, no matter if it's entirely
awful... but that won't keep this man happy, and it's a very, very unfortunate thing that Kouen needs to be kept happy.

It takes some effort to will the indignation from his face, something else entirely to stop glowering and biting a bloody hole through his lip, and Ja'far sucks in a shuddering breath, one hesitant, shaky hand reaching out to slide down the front of Kouen's chest. The worst part is it that it feels as warm and human as Sinbad always has, and that makes him squeeze his eyes shut briefly, not wanting that comparison right now. "I'm... I've never really... considered it very much, nor been asked, my lord," he admits, and it's hardly a lie. Getting swept up into Sinbad's whims is always the norm, anyway, and they just happen to be good. "So it isn't that I am not enjoying your company, it's just..."

"Just?"

Kouen lays heavy on Ja'far's body, nipping harshly at Ja'far's ear, tugging on the soft skin with his teeth. "If it's inexperience you plead, be aware that you'll have that excuse only for tonight. If I like the feel of you, I'll want you back here." He doesn't say anything about what will happen if he doesn't like the feel of Ja'far. It's easy enough to infer, he supposes, that Ja'far will extremely dislike what's in store for him in that case.

Kouen wrenches one leg up into the air, brushing his lips against the inside of one ankle, raising his eyebrows. "What are these scars?"

That makes him teeter off balance with a little yelp, flopping backwards entirely and huffing out a hot breath. Really, must everyone grab at his legs as if they are handles? Worse still is how his mind thinks back to the last time Sinbad touched him--in that damned hallway after dinner, being as perverted as he ever was by getting off on his feet, and ah, that memory shouldn't make him shiver, shouldn't make his toes curl. "Al-Sarmen," Ja'far mumbles, face flaming as he wriggles with the slide of Kouen's mouth. "They're... creative, at times."

Kouen's lips purse at that. "Should see if they have a way to fix them," he mutters absently. "Your legs would be lovely without these."

He presses Ja'far down, grabbing for a pot of scented oil by the bedside, dripping a little trickle between Ja'far's legs. "Use your fingers," he urges. "Let me see how you like taking something inside of you."

Ja'far does wonder how someone can make him feel so irritated so very quickly, though he supposes talking about his scars as if they're something ugly, or ordering him to do something he hates is a good start. Right. Kouen did want to know what he likes, didn't he?
God, he's going to regret this.

He already does, the moment he spreads his legs a fraction wider, shivering as his thighs slide up along Kouen's hips. It feels strange for it not to be Sinbad that he's cradling there, worse how it churns a nervous pit in his belly at the thought of Sinbad finding out, but this is for his king's safety, for their country's safety, and he certainly can't do his job here if Kouen doesn't trust him, or hates him, or anything of that sort. At least, that's the reminder he tells himself when his pulse jumps, when his own cock swells at the press of Kouen's body above him. "If you want, my lord," he quietly begins, pausing to bite at his lip as he slides one hand down, tentatively reaching for Kouen's cock, "I would have you... inside me. I... I've never been fond... of doing it myself."

Kouen pauses. He considers for a moment being annoyed that Ja'far is defying him, but...no, this is better, much better. The ghost of a touch against his cock is enticing, and the feel of Ja'far against him when he presses down...yes, that's much better. "Consider me," he breathes, parting Ja'far's legs as wide as they'll go, sliding up hard and eager against that soft skin, "at your service."

He wants another taste, takes what he wants, nibbling and sucking, marking up that pale, pretty neck as he reaches down to guide his cock inside with the deft curl of his own hand. A brace of his knees, and he slides in deep, breath huffing out as the sudden slick-sweet tightness closes around him, making his eyes flutter. "Gods," he breathes, eyes locked on Ja'far as he thrusts in deep, "the inside of you--"

Ja'far is sure that he shouldn't like this.

In fact, he's certain he doesn't, not with the way his legs ache with how hard they're trembling, toes curled so tightly that his feet start to cramp. He's certain he hates the way he has to choke down a groan, the way Kouen's cock shoved deep inside of him makes him feel so full, and his brow furrows, teeth biting into his lower lip as he tries, tries not to squirm, but that's easier said than done when Kouen isn't trying to hurt him, but instead wanting him to writhe like a damned harlot and ugh, he certainly feels like one.

His hands move on their own accord, thoughts starting to blur at the edges when his nails scrape against Kouen's shoulders and he strangles a whine, wriggling his way down when his cock seems intent on throbbing with every jump of his pulse. Definitely no better than a whore.

This, this writhing, wanton creature, this is what Kouen's been wanting to see. It's worth it, more than worth it to take his time, rolling his hips slowly, running his hands down Ja'far's body, watching him hungrily. Show me, show me what you only show that whore of a king, show me what you look like when you come undone. "Is this what you look like," he breathes, thrusting in hard,
knowing from enough dalliances with Judal and boy whores and a few other unnamed men that some angles are just better than others, “when someone owns you? No longer a pretty maiden, are you?”

He thrusts in hard, hands squeezing Ja’far’s ass, yanking him down. “Too despoiled for that. Too whorish.”

No no no no no--

His body wants nothing of mirroring his thoughts, not when Kouen shoves up inside of him and hits him so perfectly, so hard that his eyes snap wide and wet, a keening sound strangled in his throat. Ja'far is sure he hates the way that his legs tremble, torn between splaying wider and clinging to Kouen's waist, sure that he hates even more the way that Kouen's words seem to go straight to his cock, making him groan and arch his back, helplessly grinding against the flat plane of his stomach. It's too familiar, all of it, and that makes it impossible not to cling to the man's back, chest heaving as Ja'far squirms his way down. That is what makes him come faster than anything, that aching slither of sensation up his spine making him nearly mewl as he spills, shaking, quivering as every muscle bunches tight.

Kouen loves war. He loves conquering an enemy, and taking what that enemy cherishes, taking it and owning it in every possible way. He’d already taken Ja’far from Sinbad when the spy had shown his true colors in the ruined throne room, but now…now, feeling the pale man gasp and come around his cock, he owns.

To be sure, he enjoys it more than he’d thought he would, for far more than just because Ja’far was something that belonged to Sinbad. He can’t remember the last time he’d taken so much sheer delight in a body coming undone beneath him, and in a few more rough thrusts he spends, holding Ja’far’s eyes as he comes deep within him, making sure he knows how thoroughly he’s been claimed. “And now,” he breathes, pulling back to wipe the sweat from his brow lest it drip down, “you are truly mine.”

Wrong, Ja’far dimly thinks, honestly wondering what it is about sex that makes men think they own whatever they shove their dick into. Nevertheless, he supposes he's not much better right then, having spread his legs like a harlot and half-enjoyed it, and he huffs out a hot, ragged breath rather than argue. “…I'm honored, my lord,” Ja’far manages to sort of murmur, shivering at how slick inside he feels when he shifts. A hot bath--or five--will maybe make him feel less…used.

Thankfully, Kouen doesn't insist on him staying the night.
Even if he had, an 'joking' excuse of stabbing things that move in bed reflexively makes Kouen quick to usher him out, and that hot bath can't come soon enough. Ja'far doesn't quite sleep all the same, no matter how he tries to think of how to manage all that he has to manage and not how he just slept with Ren Kouen and sort of enjoyed it.

Ugh.

Morning can't come quickly enough, and upon counting faces and generally avoiding the breakfast table, it's easy enough to assume where Sinbad is and where he isn't. Judal's chambers is a good guess, though 'tied like a pet' to the foot of his bed isn't quite on the list. Ja'far heaves a sigh as he shuts the door behind him, turning the lock for good measure. "Please tell me they're at least feeding you."

Sinbad relaxes at the sight of Ja'far, a more welcome one than any he's ever seen. He leans back against the bed as comfortably as he can, scratching idly under the collar. "They're feeding me. Judal forgets sometimes but the maid thinks I'm handsome. How was your journey, are you well?"

"Tiresome. I'm well enough, though." Ja'far steps farther into the room, dropping down to kneel next to the other man. It's quiet in here--minus a dozen pieces of listening spellwork that Judal has no desire for, undoubtedly, and so for that, Ja'far can at least be relieved. "So is everyone back in Sindria. I had Yamu put a fake spell of sorts on everyone, including herself; Kouen thinks that it allows me to kill them even from a distance, should they disobey my direct orders."

Sinbad closes his eyes, reaching over and taking Ja'far's hand in his own. "Good. You were able to make them understand the truth?" He doesn't bother to ask if there are listening spells on them. Ja'far is a good enough assassin that he wouldn't have come if there were any danger in it, which is one of the few advantages of having a chief advisor who puts safety ahead of fun.

Ja'far huffs at that. "Yes, of course. And they apologized profusely, which I told them was unnecessary. I was rather proud they fought as hard as they did, you know." He wraps both of his hands about Sinbad's, squeezing. "You're certain you're all right? Once Kouha returns, you should go ahead and give Judal that box. Then I can get you out of here."

Sinbad hesitates, squeezing back. "You know," he says carefully, "that it will be a difficult decision for me to make. Sindria isn't in any danger right now, so it would be nothing less than cold-blooded murder of god only knows how many people."

"... Sin," Ja'far flatly retorts, "you're chained to a bed. Even if our people aren't any outright danger, it would only take a whim for Kouen to dispose of them, and you."
Sinbad shrugs. “You have a point. I’m not saying I won’t do it, just that I’ll likely be quite grumpy about it the whole way home. It’s a—”

He cuts himself off, head tilting as his hand slides up Ja’far’s arm to brush over a newly formed bruise. He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it again, looking away, something like startled pain on his face. “A kind of thing that will stay with me,” he finishes, voice shaken.

Ja’far blinks, not quite understanding the pause until he looks down at where Sinbad’s hand brushes. It takes effort, smoothing away his reaction as he glances back up, and the hot twist of regret in his belly makes him feel sick. “When Kouha returns,” he firmly says, resolute in his decision not to mention it, “you need to go ahead and do it. Kouen brought this to his doorstep, not you.”

Any last, lingering, foolish hope Sinbad had held that it was just a misunderstanding, that Ja’far would laugh and slap his head and tell him it was nothing more than a mark where a strap had rubbed against his skin, vanishes with the rest of Sinbad’s desire to handle all of this like a responsible adult. He closes his eyes, swallowing a hundred questions and comments. If Ja’far doesn’t want to speak about it, he won’t, and it’s obvious that he doesn’t. “Have you heard anything regarding the youngest brother’s movements?”

”Not yet. Though I honestly give him by the weekend, and he’ll have advanced upon Magnoshutatt enough to capture it. Laem has already weakened them substantially.” Ja’far frowns, his head tilting. Well, a few lies won't hurt at this point, if it makes Sinbad focus. “Also, don't look at me like that. A week's worth of travel across a desert is going to lead to a few bruises, you know. I'm hardly a delicate flower.”

Ah, Sinbad had been wrong. Hearing the lie is worse than the silence after all. “You needn’t explain yourself to me,” he says quietly, shifting as much as he can given his position. “You're no man’s property nor wife, I’ve no claim on your exclusive affections.”

That makes his heart thud a little faster. "Of course I'm no one's wife, I'm a man… though I'm not sure what that has to do with anything, besides. You're certain they haven't been beating you too hard?"

“Call me an idiot if you will, you always do, but don’t pretend I am one,” Sinbad says sharply. “I'll not make you speak of anything you don’t want to talk about, but don’t pretend I can’t see the marks of teeth on your neck.”
Damn, and here he'd thought those were covered up well enough. "And the one that put them there is dead now. Are you satisfied?" God, but Ja'far hates lying to Sinbad, but if he knew it was Kouen--well, that'd be the end of all of this.

Ja'far, apparently, still thinks Sinbad can't tell when he's lying. That hardly helps his mood, and forces him into the position of accepting the obvious lie--Ja'far isn't at his best when he's rattled--or making an issue of it that they probably won't be able to resolve now. "You've ever been your own man. Send me word when Ren Kouha returns. What of the middle brother, is he giving you trouble? You had mentioned his distaste for you."

At least he doesn't know it's Kouen. At least, Ja'far hopes Sinbad doesn't know that it's Kouen. "… He's left me well enough alone, thus far. He's easy to handle, besides. Nothing to worry about." Ja'far draws in a steadying breath, and slowly makes to climb to his feet. "If there's anything else you need of me?"

Don't leave me.

Sinbad's hand darts out, grabbing Ja'far's wrist on reflex, wanting to keep him here, hating that they have to part to keep up appearances if nothing else, and he slowly unclenches his fingers, releasing that familiar pale wrist. "Nothing," he says, as if he hadn't moved at all. "Be careful."

Ja'far hesitates before he sinks back down, just for a moment, just long enough to cup Sinbad's face in his hands and hold him there when he leans in to kiss him. "Sooner, rather than later," he quietly says, holding Sinbad's gaze, "I would like to go home with you. I know you think you like that Magi, but if you could see the things he does…"

Sinbad sighs, leaning into Ja'far's touch. It soothes him more than he'd expected, after the time spent chained up and disregarded, to remember that there's still someone at least who believes in him. "I wouldn't have come if I didn't intend to give it to him," he says, with a small nod. "Soon. And then we'll go home."

"… Good. And the other thing--I'll tell you about it later, when we're gone," Ja'far firmly says, giving Sinbad's cheeks a deliberate squish between his hands. "Don't be such a man, it's disgusting."

Sinbad laughs a little, self-deprecation in his voice. "Would you still want me by your side if I were other than I am?" He closes his eyes, leaning against that touch. "You should go. I won't be able to let you, otherwise. I find you too comforting."
"I'll be back later," Ja'far promises, sighing as he slides his hands away and climbs to his feet, dusting off his robes. "And I'll bring a comb. For as much as Judal wanted to keep you as a pet, he certainly doesn't groom you properly."

Sinbad has to laugh, even as his heart constricts to see Ja'far leaving. “He’s less than pleased to find out how much hair I have, as if it’s some sort of surprise. I’ll be lucky if he doesn’t shave my head. Go, let me miss you already.”

Ja'far rolls his eyes, stepping to the door to unlock it, though his chosen method of exit immediately shifts to the window. He’s lingered a bit too long, he thinks. "Behave, unless you want me kicking you in the face in public," he sternly says.

“And here I’d have thought you’d be hesitant to remind me of your feet,” Sinbad teases. “Or did you enjoy that more than you let on after all?”

A glare, and Ja'far decides that rather than answer that particular question about Sinbad's odd fetishes, flipping out of the window is a far safer option.

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As much as Kouha enjoys war, loves battle, loves winning, there's still something about coming home that is his favorite part.

This time, it's with success, clear and undisputed. But being that it's the absolute earliest hour before dawn imaginable, the festivities will have to wait, and it's with a long, heavy yawn and a dozen orders that he has his men manage the captured magicians he's brought back home for the night, his own mind focused very, very sharply on one goal and one goal only.

Koumei's door always creaks. It makes it a little impossible to sneak in unless the man is passed out drunk, but Kouha tries anyway, toeing off his shoes and leaving his sword at the door as he slithers his way into the bed, starting at the foot of it and hiking up the covers to crawl his way up and underneath them.

"Meeeeeiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii" So what if he's a war hero? He can still try and freak his brother out first.

Koumei wakes the second the door creaks--he’s caught the servants oiling it before and ordered them
to paddle themselves, he *likes* having a warning system—but relaxes as soon as he sees who it is, playing asleep until Kouha’s within reach of his arms. He can’t help the gleeful smile on his face, the soaring lightness that comes from knowing Kouha’s *safe*, he’s *home*, he’s *here*, and he scoops Kouha up in his arms, rolling over him and kissing his face a hundred times, muttering through his kisses, “You’re here, I *missed* you, I’m so--proud of you--”

Yeah, it’s *definitely* good to roll in at this hour if it means he gets a taste of Koumei first, especially when it comes to being cuddled and kissed like he’s something precious. "I missed you, too," Kouha sighs out, wriggling up against Koumei’s chest, his arms winding around his brother’s neck as he tilts his head up to rub his cheek against Koumei’s. "Ugh, you smell *good*. Soldiers don’t at all, drives me insane after a little while."

Koumei doesn’t give his brother a moment’s respite, arms tight around him as they’ll go as he kisses every bit of skin and hair and lips and eyelids he can reach. “You did so good,” he breathes. “We heard every day but there’s *never* enough news, En and I were so proud, you did *so* good--”

"You're acting like you're gonna eat me," Kouha happily sighs, sinking back into the bed—a *real* bed, comfortable and squishy and warm—and just flops his arms over Koumei’s shoulders, content to let himself be eaten. "I burnt it all to the ground, captured every magician I could--ahh, En’s gonna be so happy, he's gonna have some *really* powerful slaves."

“Maybe I will eat you,” Koumei says with a little grin, tugging the blankets over both of them. “En is already really happy with you, when we heard you felled Magnoshuttat--hey, how much news did you get? Did you hear we got Sinbad?"

"I heard, I heard--did you end up sinking the island? That part was kinda fuzzy. Is Hakuei okay?" He butts his face against Koumei’s shoulder, snuggling close. "You're all twitchy, did you really miss me that much?"

“Missed you a lot,” Koumei admits. “Judal wussed out before sinking the island and brought Sinbad back as a pet. And that stupid snake has been here for like two weeks, and En *still* thinks he’s perfect. But mostly I just missed you.”

"Must be a good lay if En is *keeping* him," Kouha snickers, and he wriggles to grab for Koumei’s hair, tugging the tail of it over his shoulder to play with. "I thought about you all the time," he admits, eyes lidded. "It's always lonely when you aren't there. I'm glad you weren't, though; it got really nasty a few times, Laem's Magi was really pissed off about *something*. I think one of the magicians I snatched up was one of her's originally."
"I think about you...all the time." _Too much. Too much because you're my brother and I should let you go and you're going to need to make a good life for yourself, but I'm not going to._ "What did you do with the Magi, by the way? Is she going to be visiting us soon?"

"Weeeell..." Kouha hedges, twirling a strand of deep red hair around one finger. "So it turns out, actually, that one of the magicians attending Magnoshutatt... was the Fourth Magi." His eyes lid. "I apparently met him on the road traveling there, initially, but he was deliberately sealed, so I didn't realize. But he surrendered himself on the condition I didn't kill anyone else. So, that's that. He's sealed up again, tossed with the rest of the magicians I picked up. I didn't want to say anything about it yet, lest the witch find out and try and _do_ something, I don't know what."

Koumei’s eyes lid in pleasure, and he lets out a pleased little noise. His voice is almost sing-song as he murmurs, “En is gonna throw you a para-ade,” finishing with a firm kiss just under Kouha’s ear, body bent almost double to curl around his little brother. “Seriously, I don’t think you could have done better. You really captured a Magi? Is he more like Scheherazade, or like Judal?”

"He _said_ he was a Magi, and there was so much rukh you could _see_ it, so..." Kouha sighs happily, unsure if it’s the attention and affection or the _praise_ that makes his pulse flutter. "And he's not like either of them. He acts pretty normal, you know? He's just a kid, too. He seemed nice enough when I met him before, so I felt a little bad about it all and tried to treat him kinda nicely. Maybe I'll keep him, if En lets me."

“I don’t see why he wouldn’t, unless maybe he’s got some plan. But I’m sure if he did he’d give you another reward instead,” Koumei mumbles, moving a hand up to stroke through Kouha’s hair, burying his face in the boy’s neck and inhaling deeply. “Right now you could probably ask for almost anything and he’d give it to you. Ahhh, Judal might be a little mad, you might steal his thunder and he’s been riding the high of defeating Sindria for a while now.”

"Judal can get over it." Kouha grumbles, squirming around to throw a leg over Koumei’s hip, effectively latching himself onto his brother. "He's got a king on a leash, what's he got to be mad about? But hey, En hasn't been a jerk while I've been gone, has he? Is he still inviting the snake to the dinner table?"

Koumei scowls, hands splaying out on Kouha’s back, feeling the beat of his heart and letting that calm him. “To his table,” he mutters, “and his conference room, and his office and the war room, and as of late even to his _bed_. Even after he got Ei back, I think he’s trying to spite her.”

"Ahhh, and En wonders why he can never keep a woman," he giggles, nuzzling up underneath Koumei’s chin and gently setting his teeth to the arc of his throat. "Coulda sworn he'd at least pick a girl to do that with, though. Oh well, En is _weird_. He needs someone that's gonna make him feel like a dumbass and really smart at the same time."
Koumei shivers happily, letting out little noises of pleasure at the scrape of Kouha’s teeth. “He needs someone that is going to give me a headache, apparently. What about you? Find any pretty magician girls to carry off over your shoulder?”

"No headaches allowed," is Kouha's grumble, giving his brother's hair a light tug for good measure before he nibbles again, savoring the taste of Koumei's skin. "Mnnn… there were a couple. Amusingly enough, the prettiest one was a boy. That's Scheherazade's thing. Sickly, though, not sure I wanna go there."

Koumei hisses out a breath, twitching forward as the smell of Kouha, the feel of him, the tug on his hair and the teeth on his throat start to take a toll on his resolve to just cuddle his younger brother tonight. “Her thing? The magician you said belonged to her? I’m sure if you ride it until it breaks En will….mmm, get you a new one.”

"Yeah… I don't know what the story is with that one, but he looks a lot like her. Really powerful, too. Hehh, you're a different kind of twitchy now," Kouha teases, giving Koumei's neck another little nip as he paws at his chest. "When I said I missed you, I really meant it. My girls still aren't anywhere near as good as you."

Koumei rolls over onto his back, all the better to slide his hands up and down Kouha’s back and sides, biting his own lip to keep from losing control and just humping up against him. “Sorry,” he mutters, “you’re tired, I wasn’t going to—I was going to be good tonight,” he sighs. “Let me be good for you instead.”

Kouha grins lazily, wriggling his way up to straddle Koumei's chest. "You're always good, though," he sighs, yanking on the ties of his clothing to pull his cock free. "You wanna taste, Mei? I've missed your mouth, no one sucks cock like you."

God, his mouth waters at that alone. It’s probably bad, how fast he’s gone from congratulating Kouha on his trip to salivating at the thought of his cock, but…well, in his defense, Kouha has a really lovely cock. His hands flex and knead, cupping Kouha’s ass as he nods, voice hitching as he leans forward to try and take the tip into his mouth. “Please, let me….give it to me, no one tastes like you, I need it—"

This is one hell of a welcome home present, and at least a dozen times better than anything En could give him, besides. Wriggling the last little bit forward proves it when the head of his cock rubs over Koumei's lips, sliding into that hot, slick mouth, and there's no helping the groan that pulls from his throat, the eagerness of his hands that grab for his brother's hair as his hips twitch forward. "Just like that," Kouha breathes. "God, you've got a pretty mouth."
Koumei sighs out a grateful breath through his nose, tongue dragging and curling around the head of Kouha’s cock, eyes lidding at the hands in his hair, mouth wet and eager as he slides it up, over the swollen, leaking head, tonguing over it with shivering licks and sucks, wanting to show Kouha just how much he’s been missed. His hands squeeze, dragging him closer still, wanting all of him at once, wanting him in his mouth, in his throat. “Don’t want to be pretty,” he gasps when he pulls off for a second, just to rub the head on his lips again. “Want to be all filthy and messy with you.”

"Shame, because you're pretty when you're a mess, too," Kouha groans, fingers sliding close to Koumei's scalp as he scoots forward, yanking to hold his brother's head in place as his cock slides past those swollen lips again, down over the slick wriggle of his tongue until he bumps the back of Koumei's throat, rutting against his face with short, eager jerks of his hips. "Look at you, taking all of it," he pants out, eyes fluttering. "Such a good slut, just like I remembered."

Koumei fairly glows with the praise, leaning forward as far as he can, trying to prove that he’s as good as Kouha remembers, better, and ah, he only gags because he loves it. He shoves himself down until he chokes, wet desperate sounds forcing their way out of his throat as he writhes, his own cock so hard between his legs that he dares not touch it. Tears spill from his eyes as he pulls off, moaning in his throat, only to shove himself down again. Kouha isn't kidding when he says his brother is better than any girl he's ever had--better, by leaps and bounds, and god, if this isn't a reminder. His hips roll forward with every slide of Koumei's tongue, fingers twisting up into the thick of his hair as he shoves as far down Koumei's throat as he can, hissing, groaning at the spasm around him whenever Koumei gags. "Good," Kouha huffs, and one hand yanks free, sliding back to press between Koumei's legs. Feeling how hard his brother is just makes his own cock twitch and throb, and Kouha grinds the heel of his palm in as he yanks from Koumei's mouth, the head of his cock sliding slick and dripping over his lips. "Want you to come all over yourself," he breathlessly orders. "Just like the slut I know you are--ahhh, god--"

That's the last of his own self-control, his hips jerking as he spills over Koumei's face, coating his lips and cheeks and eyelids as he comes hard.

It’s the words, and the feel of Kouha painting him like the slut he is more than the hand on his cock that gets to Koumei. Nothing is like this, not with anyone, not even close to giving him what he needs. Kouha gives it to him automatically, knows without being asked, knows before Koumei can even say a thing, and that’s enough in and of itself. His hips lurch up into the hard touch, too hard for most people, but he loves the pain that comes along with it. It only takes a twitch of his hips to be enough, and he comes hard, spilling over himself as he strains up, trying to clean Kouha’s cock with his tongue, wanting to taste and yet wanting to keep as much of his brother’s seed on his face as he can, lips swollen and sticky as he collapses back onto the bed. “Ha…” he breathes, broken, shivering.
"Really, really good," Kouha praises, voice little more than a purr as he leans down, licking a stripe up one cheek to taste Koumei as much as himself. "Mei is always the best… such a perfect whore," he murmurs, thumb dragging affectionately over his brother's lower lip. "Just what I love coming home to."

Koumei shudders, parting his lips to suck that thumb into his mouth, still messy and slick as he curls his tongue around it. He still aches, but that's nothing new. He always does, when he's been apart from Kouha for too long, and it takes weeks sometimes until he doesn't feel like he'd hump the first part of his brother to slow down for long enough. “Like serving you, being a whore for you,” he says, voice hoarse as he trembles.

"I wish I could bring you with me, just for this," Kouha wearily sighs, twisting his thumb languidly against Koumei's tongue. "Way too pretty for the battlefield, though. You'd get eaten."

“I wouldn’t mind,” Koumei murmurs, nibbling at the flesh presented to him. “And I’d just stay in your tent and get on my knees for you when you were all….mmm, covered in blood and with your heart racing, and….do you get hard after battle? I know some men do.”

_I'd mind_ is the thought that goes through Kouha's mind, and he almost has to laugh at himself. God, he's been away and stressed out for too long now if he's giving a shit about who touches Koumei. He flops down, stretching out atop his brother. "After? Try during. It's always one hell of a rush," he sighs out. "Way too much fun."

Kouha had had a tutor once, who’d taught him a great deal about using sword and knife in conjunction, before he’d conquered his dungeon. That man had gotten too worked up, seeing how Kouha enjoyed battles even in practice, and Koumei had noticed before anything could happen, quietly disposing of the man. But seeing the way he looks, how his blood sings and his face lights up and….

Well, he can hardly fault the man.

He wraps his arms around Kouha’s waist, sliding slowly against him, luxuriating in the slight weight on top of him, reminding him of his _place_. “I’d do anything for you. You know that.”

"That's why Mei is my favorite," Kouha murmurs, sliding his hands up to lace his fingers back through Koumei's hair, absently stroking. "You're the best welcome home present, you know. Better than anything En's gonna do."
Koumei near-purrs at the touch, stretching his legs out and wriggling long toes. “I’m hardly a special welcome-home present, you know. I belong to you.”

Kouha grins at that, dragging his fingers close to the scalp in a slow, kneading flex of his fingers. "Yeah. That's why you're special. You're my favorite, I told you."

Koumei arches his neck, rubbing his head into the touch. Kouha has the best fingers, and he smiles, liking the way it makes the drying mess on his face stretch and crack, making him feel well and truly used no matter that he hardly aches at all. “I did what you said. I was good. No guards, no visits to the city since you left.”

Kouha blinks, his head tilting in vague amusement. "… You actually did that? Huh." His fingers rub in a little harder, far more pleased than he probably should be. "Then later, when I'm not exhausted, I'll give you a really good reward."

“I always try,” Koumei mutters, flushing at the admission, at the fact that Kouha knows, knows he tries and that he usually can’t go so long without being thrown to the floor and fucked and beaten. “Been busy. That helped. You should sleep, I like listening to you breathe slow.”

"You're cute," is Kouha's sigh to follow as he just flops down, nuzzling his face into the crook of Koumei's neck. "And kinda creepy, but I like it. Good pillow, too. I'll fuck you up really good tomorrow, okay, Mei? As a present."

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Men reveal the most about themselves when they’re pushed.

Kouen’s pushed Ja’far a few times now, but it’s close to being routine. He can see the disconnect in the spy’s eyes, as much as he probably doesn’t think it exists; there’s a change, a guardedness on his face when he’s in Kouen’s bed, that turns to something a lot more quietly amused, a lot more self-assured when they’re somewhere else. That’s fine, but Kouen wants to know how far he can push it, before Ja’far reveals his true loyalty, whatever it may be.

And since he’s been blunt before, and even then Ja’far had trouble with the concept, he doesn’t bother being oblique.
Everyone is gone, by this point, except his brothers and Ja’far, packing up to leave the war council. Kouen doesn’t pause, but grabs Ja’far by the waist when he stands, tugging him back onto his lap. “You, stay,” he says firmly, and not nearly quietly enough that the others won’t hear. *How far will you let me go?* “I want to have you here.”

Ja’far is starting to dislike Kouen on a *personal* level, and that’s never good for his line of work.

It's especially not good when recalling how stupidly *good* the man is at riling him in the bedroom, no matter his trepidations each and every time. Now, it's even worse, when he's not expecting it and thrown entirely off-kilter. It's one thing to be asked to Kouen's bed and to *know* what is coming. It's something else to play the role of advisor and suddenly be yanked into another role—*or a lap*, as it may be.

His back is as stiff as a board, he knows. Kouha looks *amused*, eyebrows arched high and chin set into one hand, and Ja’far wills himself to draw a slow, calming breath. "...Is like *this* entirely necessary, my lord?" he can't help but mutter, trying very hard not to compare it all to another king that he knows.

“I deem it so.”

Kouen mouths a hot kiss onto the side of Ja’far’s neck, more amused than he should be at the look on Koumei’s face. “Why so skittish, little snake? Is it the watching eyes?” He drags a hand down Ja’far’s chest, cupping him through the fabric between his legs. “Don’t worry about them, they’ve seen me coupling enough times.” Kouha’s done more than *see*, though the memory of those few times, drunk and confused and a little excited, is enough to make his face color slightly. “Or would you prefer that we don’t do this *alone*?”

Ja’far strangles a noise into the back of his throat, his eyes quickly flickering upward towards the ceiling. Maybe, *maybe* if he doesn't watch what Kouen's hands are doing, pretends that he's anywhere but here, his body won't be such a damnable traitor, especially in front of the man's *brothers*. "I’d much rather we be *entirely* alone, in fact," he mumbles, his anxious squirm backwards *truly* not helping when all he can feel is Kouen's broad chest against his back.

"...Should I keep telling you about my conquests, En?" Kouha drawls, watching with lidded eyes. "Or should we leave you to your own devices?" *Wow, you must like that one a lot. How jealous is Judal, I wonder?*

“Mmm, you don’t like being watched?” Kouen asks archly, his eyes enough signal to Kouha that he doesn’t want to be left alone *quite* yet, even as he nips at the soft skin of Ja’far’s neck, behind his ear,
hands sliding up to rub a nipple through his robes, the other one pressing down between his legs, feeling the warmth and eagerness starting to rise under his touch. “Kouha has just won a great victory, after all. You wouldn’t be rude and refuse him anything he wants, would you? Or do you want to have me to yourself so badly? Tell me.” No matter what Ja’far says, Kouen expects, it’ll make him hard.

Ah, Ja’far really does hate this country.

That's the easiest thing to blame it all on right now--this country, this family, especially when he sucks in a sharp, fast breath, his teeth sinking into his lower lip to keep back a groan when he can feel the callouses on Kouen's fingers even through fine silk, dragging against his nipples and between his legs and no matter the mantra of please don't just this once don't react, his body is so stupidly, stupidly eager.

At least, Ja'far miserably thinks, there's no contest about what's worse.

"I… would much rather have you to myself." His face flames with those words alone. "I'm hardly worthy entertainment, besides."

"Dunno about that," Kouha murmurs, "I could watch this for awhile. En, does he keep making those cute faces when you sit him on your cock?"

“Even better ones,” Kouen says with a grin, and only blinks a little when the door opens and shuts hard, and it’s just him and Ja’far and Kouha now. He dismisses that as unimportant; Mei does strange things like that, more often than not, and it isn’t as though he doesn’t know where to find his brother when he needs him. “Ha’s right, Ja’far,” he murmurs, both hands sliding down to spread Ja’far’s legs apart, to both sides of his own so he can run his hands up and down the insides of those smooth thighs, down to pluck at the hem of his robe and start to lift it up. “You don’t need to worry, you’re perfectly good entertainment. If that’s your only objection, cast it aside. Isn’t he fine entertainment, brother?"

"Ah… yeah." Kouha's gaze flickers from the door, back to Ja'far, just long enough to catch a glimpse of pale creamy thighs and--damn it all to hell, he wants to stay. "Let me watch again later," he requests with a grin as he pushes away from the table. "Right now, Mei's all cranky. You two have fun without me, okay?"

Ja’far sags in relief when Kouha makes a quick exit of his own. He'd never thought he'd be happy to be left alone with Kouen in this sort of circumstance, but given the other option… "Must we do this here?" he tries again all the same, shifting in an attempt to press his legs back together. He's long
accepted that this is going to happen--now it's simply a matter of can I make this a little bit less mortifying.

Kouen’s hand moves fast, catching Ja’far’s chin and turning his head sharply to the side to meet his own eyes. “Did your previous king enjoy your constant complaining?” he asks mildly, and his eyes glint with a hint of steel. “In case you are still in any doubt, it is not appreciated here.”

He pulls a vial of oil free from a pocket, a little bit grateful that Koumei had left as he did. On the chance that Ja’far still has yet to show his true colors--impossible ever to tell, with a spy so good--that’s more ammunition he’d be handing the man.

"He seemed to think it charming, my apologies," Ja’far can't quite bite back, though he's learned by now that even if his tongue too sharp, if the rest of him is soft and pliant enough, Kouen doesn't seem to care. It makes him feel like a whore all the more, makes his cheeks flush hot again when he wriggles back, just a bit, all to bite his lip at the hard press of Kouen's cock against the curve of his ass.

Kouen’s annoyance melts into amusement at the pressure of Ja’far’s ass against his slick cock, and he rubs a bit more oil on himself, having learned from previous sessions that Ja’far likes it when it stings a bit, when he’s not quite prepared enough. “And did you play always the demure virgin with him?” he breathes into one ear, lifting Ja’far easily by the waist, hauling him back before lowering him down, the thick head of his cock stretching the younger man for a long, tense second before sliding in. “Or did you ever let him see what a harlot you can really be, when you’re properly fucked?”

Ah, god.

Ja'far hates his mind in moments like these. Kouen's cock isn't quite as long as Sinbad's, but it's just as thick, and that makes him writhe all the same, his mouth falling open as he's pulled down, legs trembling at how stuffed full he feels. His cock jumps, throbs at the disgusting reminder of how much deeper Kouen can shove up into him when they're like this, when he's on top and writhing like a whore. "I had… my moments of both," he manages on a groan, torn between sagging forward to scrabble for leverage against the table or sinking into the hard, broad warmth of Kouen's chest. The latter wins out, feeling far too weak to do anything besides, and Ja'far's head lolls back, a broken whine pulling from his lips.

Kouen loves war, and battle, and most of all he loves victory. Every thrust of his cock inside the slight little spy is a victory against a man now bound by his will, and Kouen makes sure there are many of them, bucking up hard again and again, holding Ja’far with an arm around his waist that might as well be an iron bar for all the give it has. “Such a sweet body,” he murmurs, letting his beard rub against Ja’far’s neck and shoulder, liking the way it gets red and roughened. “A ripe fruit--for the plucking.” He yanks Ja’far down, pulls him back so he can stroke up perfectly inside the man,
wanting to hear him come undone. “You may scream, if you like. The walls of my council room are thick.”

While that probably isn't a lie, Ja'far can't quite bring himself to stop choking on his own voice--not when there's a chance of someone overhearing, and even less a chance that it might be Sinbad. His head gives a helpless shake, his toes curling and leg muscles bunching tight when Kouen steals the breath from him, his body seizing up in a tight, aching shudder when he's struck just right, again and again to the point of overstimulation and he's not sure if he's breathing or sobbing.

Somehow, Kouen likes it when Ja’far is voiceless, helpless, as much as he thinks he would if Ja’far were screaming. He stands, enough to throw the smaller man over the edge of the table, holding him down hard and slamming in as deep and fast as he pleases, all patience gone, taking nothing but pleasure from the rough, brutal thrusts, one hand stealing up to wrap around Ja’far’s neck, the other shoving his back down onto the table. He leans back, eyes tracing over the place where they're joined, and his voice is nothing but a feral growl when he spills, filling Ja’far deeply, wanting to say something else, to taunt him, to say something about that other king, but there are no thoughts in his head except for how good it feels.

He shouldn't get off on this as much as he does.

Ja'far is starting to think he really isn't much more than a dirty harlot, what with how Kouen can pluck his strings and make him feel so damnably, perfectly used. He chokes on another sob, biting down into the back of his own arm when he comes, eyes wide and wet as he spills a bare second after Kouen, the feeling of being so full, dripping and slick shoving him over the edge in short order. He hurts, and he's going to have bruises on his hips and thighs and probably his elbows too, at this rate--things he'll have to let heal before he sneaks another visit to Sinbad, without a doubt.

He huffs out a hot, heavy breath, burying his face down into his arm. Is this a typical thing that kings want from their advisors? Maybe he's signed up for the wrong job.

Kouen pulls away slowly, stretching back with a lazy grin on his face, giving Ja’far’s ass a sharp slap. “You look good all debauched like that,” he says, dragging a finger down the spreading mess on one pale thigh. “I should take your clothes and just have you go about naked.”

That is definitely not going to happen. Ja’far hides his wince at the slap, skin twitching beneath Kouen's touch. "I do believe that would greatly interfere with my productivity, Prince Kouen," he mutters, slowly pushing himself up with a grimace. "And last I recall, you don't fancy looking at all of my scars, either."
“I hadn’t thought that one who served such a careless drunkard would take a man seriously when he is so obviously in jest.” Kouen adjusts his hair, smoothing out his beard as he tucks his robes around himself properly. “Go clean yourself up. I still want you in my bed this night.”

"Forgive me, I'm not entirely used to your humor yet," Ja'far dryly retorts, smoothing his robes as best he can and trying very hard not to think about having to do this all again later. Do normal people have libidos like this, or is that a king thing, too? Or do I somehow incite this, Ja'far miserably has to wonder.

“Not to worry, you’ll have time. And make certain you’re quite clean,” Kouen adds, hand on the doorknob. “I suspect it will be just the two of us, but who knows?”

"Ah. Exciting." Kill me now.
“Don’t you just love when the whole family can be together over dinner?”

Gyokuen is smiling, which any idiot knows is probably not cause for excitement. Koumei keeps his head down, affecting extreme disinterest, which has at least so far been enough to keep him out of everyone’s sights. At least he thinks it has; it’s hard to tell, with his family. None of them ever show their true colors for any reason, not least of all himself.

And perhaps most of all Gyokuen, at the head of the merry little table. Kouen sits on her right, Koumei on his, Kouha on his, with Hakuei on Gyokuen’s left. The other princesses are mixed in with En’s generals and that pale snake, and Koumei tolerates the looks his elder brother shoots the spy somewhat better than he tolerates Kouha constantly trying to toss grains of food down the front of his sisters’ robes. “You’re acting like a churl,” he hisses more than once out of the corner of his mouth, reaching over to step gently on Kouha’s foot.

Even chiding his brother doesn’t help distract him from the fact that Gyokuen is smiling, at least in part, at him.

"I'm a war hero," is Kouha's petulant hiss in return, reversing the hierarchy of their feet so that his toe can poke at Koumei’s foot instead. "Besides, they think it's funny, don't be so cranky."

Dinner with this 'family' has got to be one of the more entertaining things, Ja'far thinks—minus Kouen eyeballing him like he's going to jump across the table and eat him alive, that is. It would be a bit more entertaining if these bloody idiots would take five minutes to chat about Magnoshutatt, but apparently praising Kouha and idle mentions of magicians taken as prisoners is good enough or right now. Worse still is the fact he hasn't been able to sneak away and see the prisoners in question, but the uneasy pit in his stomach certainly proves nothing good. Ah, he needs more wine.

“Kouha, darling.” Gyokuen purrs, the first time she’s spoken all night, and Koumei’s stomach clenches. It takes all his willpower not to look up, given that he isn’t being addressed, and keep poking listlessly at his plate when all his attention is on his stepmother. “Are you going to make me a present of the slaves you brought back? I'll be nice and not ask for the tithe you owe your Emperor if you’ll make me a pretty gift.”

Kouha is hardpressed not to scrunch up his nose and stick his tongue out at the witch. "With all due respect, what in the world do you want with them? You've got an army of magicians," he sniffs.
"They're definitely not any better."

Koumei steps slowly, heavily on Kouha’s foot under the table. It probably won’t help, never does, but he has to try anyway. It makes his skin crawl, watching the witch look at his little brother.

He especially doesn’t like it when she smiles at that. “Oh, was I misinformed? I heard that a great prize of a magician surrendered himself unto you, and you spared the rest of them. If you would prefer not to render me a gift, I’ll take my tithe.”

"Yeah, but that one's mine," Kouha grumbles underneath his breath, trying very hard not to growl before he adds in a louder tone: "There's one that might suit your tastes, if you want him. He's certainly pretty enough, if that's what you want, and apparently he's Scheherazade's man or something like it." Joke's on her, anyway, because that one's less than healthy.

“I’ve heard of that one,” Gyokuen says, painted lips widening in a smile. “Am I mistaken, or does he come with another little gift attached, a barbarian healer prince? I’ll take the both of them, in exchange for my rightful tribute--since as your brother has reminded me time and again, you did so well on your little excursion.”

If it gets her out of his hair and shutting the fuck up--"They're yours, then," Kouha dismissively replies, relieved, at least, that she didn't press the issue about the Magi. He doesn't want to share that one, dammit.

“Ah,” Gyokuen sighs, clapping her hands together, “my beloved children are bringing me such prizes. It makes me so proud. Ah, this reminds me,” she says, with the air of one who’s been planning an announcement meticulously for some time and affects forgetfulness, “Hakuei, I’ve decided on a husband for you.”

Hakuei, to her credit, doesn't choke on her tea. "Ah… you have, Mother?" she weakly replies, trying very hard not to let her gaze flicker to Kouen instinctively. Bickering or not, she still has a certain preference.

“I have,” Gyokuen announces merrily. Koumei’s eyes sidetrack to his brother, watching the tense of his jaw. Assuming she doesn’t pick En, whoever she does choose won’t last the night. Please let it be Ja'far, please let it be Ja'far, come on Step-mother, just say it's for an alliance or something…

“Koumei isn’t yet promised, and he’s a fine prince of an age with you.”
Kouha promptly chokes on his next mouthful of wine.

Hakuei can only stare at her mother. She's doing this on purpose is the immediate, sharp realization, because she knows. There are a dozen alliance marriages that could have been done, but to ask her to marry Koumei?

What does she even say to that?

Silence falls as Kouen’s glass makes contact with the table. “There will be no need for that,” he says, deep voice rumbling. “Hakuei will be my wife.”

Gyokuen laughs, and Koumei cringes, even as he tries not to make eye contact with either Kouen or Hakuei. “What a fool you are, my beloved son. I have something different planned for you.”

“You misunderstand me. Hakuei will be my wife.” Kouen’s eyes flash as he turns on Gyokuen. “And if you try to give her to another--”

“You’ll what? Commit treason?”

Koumei misses what happens next. He’s pretty sure everyone does, as it happens well within an eyeblink, a surge of crackling power, magic scorching through the air and leaving the scent of ozone behind. When the smoke clears, Kouen is on the floor, bleeding from the eyes and ears, Gyokuen straddling his prone form. “Take him,” she cries, and a pair of guards come forward, grabbing the unconscious prince by the arms. “Secure him in the darkest cellar my palace has.”

That means their after-dinner date is canceled, Ja'far assumes. This family, though.

For an entirely different reason, he's a little stressed by that fact. Kouen, for as irritating as the man can be, is at least mostly sane, and far from the corrupted witch that Gyokuen is. Dealing with her is far from something he looks forward to.

"Mother, please--" Hakuei hurriedly climbs to her feet, grabbing for her mother's arm. "That's unnecessary, you know of his loyalty, he's just--when it comes to me, he's protective and would see me with no other, so show him forgiveness!"
"So do I get to kill her yet?" Kouha mutters underneath his breath to Koumei, a second from leaping to his feet, fingers twitching with the urge to have his damned sword already.

“Look at what she did to En, you fool,” Koumei hisses, panic making his voice sharp. “I don’t have time to drain her and she’d fry you to your boots in a second, stay in your seat.”

“You’re young,” Gyokuen says indulgently, changing Hakuei’s grip to pet her daughter’s hair. "Young, and foolish, to be bearing your shame so proudly.” Her hand slides down and pats Hakuei’s belly, then chucks her under the chin. “Unless you would share your cousin’s fate in the dungeon, my sweet, do as your mother bids. And now everyone can see, I think,” she says, voice louder to echo to the end of the table, “how even the conqueror of many dungeons fares against the might of the Emperor’s magic. Come, Koumei, give your bride your hand.”

Only the memory of his brother’s bleeding face and slack body makes Koumei stand, though his hand feels like lead as he tries to lift it, and he can’t meet Kouha’s eyes.

Oh, he's not going to just kill her. He'll roast the bitch alive, maybe let the slaves she wanted so badly do it for him. Kouha's teeth grind almost audibly, and it takes everything in his power not to stab a fork between Gyokuen's eyes.

And now Kouen's generals start clamoring, muttering amongst themselves as Hakuei reluctantly, shakily takes Koumei's hand, and Ja'far resolves himself to drink more. Well, it's entertaining for now, at least, and chaos means easier to take down later on.

Hours later, when the iron grip of Gyokuen has finally released his shoulder, Koumei tries to retreat to his rooms. No sooner does he make a move than Gyokuen is there, jovial as she suggests that Hakuei accompany him, that they start enjoying each others’ company sooner rather than later, and makes flippant comments about giving her child company that turn Koumei’s stomach. A pair of dark-eyed guards accompanies them, the same ones that have kept him from Kouha’s side all night, every step of the way to his rooms, leaving him there finally alone with Hakuei.

He throws his power out over the room, taking care of any listening spells, and wastes no time in going to the closet and pulling out the largest, most comfortable robe he owns, wrapping himself in it three or four times until he masters the urge to hyperventilate. He leans over the table, looking up at Hakuei, eyes wild. “What the hell are we going to do?”

Hakuei feels no less calm, but one look at Koumei makes it clear that she has to be, lest the man have
some sort of a nervous breakdown. Well, she supposes she can't blame him. As shocking as her mother's machinations were for her, it must be a dozen times less enjoyable being told one is to wed their eldest brother's lover. "Kill her," is her blunt response, taking a prim seat upon the edge of his bed, ankles crossing. "There's literally nothing else we can do at this point."

Koumei rakes a hand back through his hair, leaving it sticking up in all directions around his face, the long ponytail sagging ever closer to the floor as his anxiety grows. “Because that worked so well for En? He’s a thousand times more powerful than I, and your djinn can only blow her around for a few seconds. We’ll have Ha, but I don’t want to get him involved if I can’t help it. I--we have to do it soon, but she’ll be expecting that of course, I would, she’s got a plan behind it--” He starts chewing on a fingernail, words getting faster, closer and closer together as the fear grows.

This is the spotlight, a part of it he’s never, ever wanted, the kind of thing that can bring everything crashing down. This is En hating him, and Ha getting into horrible trouble, and Gyokuen’s sights set on him, and he’s no good in the spotlight, that’s someone else’s job, someone charismatic and quick-witted, not him.

"Do you have any alcohol in here?" Hakuei dispassionately interrupts. "Because you need to drink it." She sighs, leaning back onto one hand. "Mei. Stop thinking of this as something personal for five seconds, and think of it as another kind of warfare. There's a reason En keeps you as his closest advisor, so let's think. What can kill her? She's a powerful magician, yes, but she's not immortal. How close are you to Judal these days?"

Koumei pauses mid-panic, grabs a bottle of wine from the cupboard, yanks the cork out with his teeth, and takes several deep gulps. It’s more than he usually drinks in a week, and by the time he sets the bottle down, he already feels the tingle spreading to his toes. “Right,” he says, and his voice comes out a rasp, vocal chords a bit paralyzed. “That’s the good thing about facing a magician, if you can block off their power they’re just as squishy as anyone. She knows what I can do, so she’ll be expecting it, might have something….uh, in place. Or at least ready to go.” He takes a deep steadying breath--too deep, and his vision swims just slightly, enough to make him check and see if this is one of the poisoned bottles he keeps around for exigent circumstances. It is, annoyingly enough, though he’s built up enough of an immunity that he could drink the whole bottle without dying. This still won’t be a fun night.

He shoots Hakuei a glance, lingering down on her belly. “It’s definitely En’s? I have to ask. It shouldn’t be, you know.”

Hakuei levels a flat stare upon him. "Yes, it's definitely En's. This was planned, you know. Paimon helped to will it." A protective hand slides over her belly as she heaves a sigh. "It's best if you don't lift a hand against her. If she wants you dead, it will happen. That's why I asked about Judal... though I'm not sure if Al-Sarmen will allow him within an inch of her, all things considered. He won't be pleased about En either, I imagine."
“I could kill him myself, he gave her the perfect opening,” Koumei mutters. “She’s been looking for a reason to strike at him second for ages, he knows that, I’ve warned him about it a thousand times.” He pours her a glass of water, almost sends for a servant to slice off a lemon, then changes his mind and does it anyway. “You don’t need to glare at me, I was there when he saw the healer. She said he’d never father a child.”

"… All the more reason why you shouldn't be surprised when he acted as he did. He'd already thought me taken from him once, Mei. He was not going to sit there and let it happen again right in front of him. Stupid, maybe, but I can't blame him." She sighs, shaking her head. "She has little to no skill in combat, you know. A pity we don't have a capable--"

Oh.

Except they do.

"--… assassin." Hakuei's eyebrows lift slowly at her cousin. "Or should I say, a pity we don't have one that you haven't entirely been a brat to."

Koumei lets that sink in a moment, then hisses out a slow, furious breath. The wine slows his thoughts, or maybe the poison, until they’re almost slow enough to speak out loud instead of the racing madness of silence that usually goes on behind his eyes. “If I go to him, he'll know that I'm playing the game of setting them against each other and hoping one of them dies,” he says, eyes tracking over imaginary figures, watching them move. “We’ll need--yes, something that gives him proper incentive, and there’s no way he’s loyal to En, not with how well he puts up with his pawing when he’d obviously rather be elsewhere. Ah, Judal’s going to kill me.”

He blinks. “Did that come out making sense? I’ve taken a lot of belladonna.”

"If you're talking about how he's most definitely still attached at the hip with King Sinbad, then yes, it made perfect sense," Hakuei mildly says. "But you'll be hardpressed getting him to admit it, if he keeps being as good as he has been so far. He also has little to gain in killing Gyokuen right now… he knows all of this is going to throw us for a loop and make things difficult for every last one of us."

Koumei purses his lips, examining her words, then shakes his head, sending the room spinning. “I knew I forgot to say something aloud. No, what I meant is that we should offer him his king’s freedom in exchange for the deed. I never wanted any war with Sindria, it was a stupid idea in the
"Well, I can certainly agree with that," Hakuei mutters, tilting her head back with a sigh. "Right. Judal, though—he'll be very difficult in this, even if it means En walks free… he's quite smitten with that king."

“He’s too damned happy to have—"

A thought strikes Koumei, and he chews on his lip absently until it bleeds down his chin, eyes wide and dark with the belladonna. “You,” he mutters. “You go to the king, tell him to be awful, terribly behaved. Make Judal angry enough to want to be rid of him, by his death or exile or sale, and then we’ll tell the snake we have a way to save him. He likes you, doesn’t he? Of course he does, everyone likes you.”

Hakuei wonders if she's talking to her older cousin, or a five year old child that's gone nearly hysterical courtesy of losing his favorite toy. Same difference, she wryly thinks with a shake of her head. "I'll speak to him," she carefully says as she pushes herself to her feet, and grabs for Koumei's arm to set him properly onto the bed and wrap another blanket around him. "But I'm not sure anything can make Judal want to get rid of him. I think we'll have to rely more on my mother for that."

“Use sex,” Koumei suggests. “It makes men insane. You should know that by now. Don’t use the witch, we have enough trouble with her very existence. No attempt to use her has ever done more than kill the user. Just ask your father.”

"True enough." Ah, and now that she thinks about it… giving Sinbad enough opportunity could have very satisfying results. "I'll take care of it," Hakuei reassures him. "Will you rest, in the meantime? I'll sleep on your chaise, I have no doubts Ha will find a way to sneak into your bed later."

“He can’t.” His voice breaks on that, and Koumei sags down into the bed. “I can’t let her hurt him, she’s got guards and she’ll hurt him, Ei, and if she confronts him and I’m not there and En’s not there, he’ll do something stupid and she’ll hurt him.”

Hakuei simply shakes her head, kneeling in front of him as she takes one of his hands. "Ha is fully capable of taking care of himself," she firmly says. "Especially in a situation that concerns you. I doubt he will do anything terribly stupid, and certainly not enough to get himself killed. That being said, he'll probably climb through your window in the middle of the night, don't put it past him, so I'm sleeping on the couch."
After a long moment, or at least what seems like one in his current condition, Koumei nods slowly.

“All right. You’re right, he’s smart. And it's worth more than my life to touch you if En ever found out. Plus, no offense, but…” He spreads his hands wordlessly as he climbs into bed, indicating, well, she knows what.

That makes her snort out a laugh. "None taken, I assure you. If asked, however, I'll be sure to spin a tale about how you're quite the vigorous lover. At least be prepared to demonstrate if my mother demands it, I'll deal with En."

Koumei gags in his mouth, pulling out a handkerchief out at the last second. “That’s the belladonna,” he mutters, though it’s far more the thought of bedding his pretty cousin, and more than that the thought of what En would do to him. “God, why me? What could she possibly want with me except to piss En off, and anyone would have done that?”

"She probably knows about you and Ha," Hakuei tiredly replies, dropping herself down onto the chaise. "And wants something with him, too. It's easier, if she has us all separated like this."

“Of course she knows about us, she attacked us while we were….in a carriage,” he finishes in a mumble. Kouha had looked so pretty that day. “I'll kill myself before she can use me against him.”

"That's not very constructive," is her put out retort. "Don't be so fatalistic, you're of no use to him dead."

“But I'm no use to anyone alive either--ugh, leave me alone, I'm poisoned,” Koumei moans, falling back on the bed. “You were the one who told me to drink, this is your fault.”

"At least it took the edge off, now just sleep it off," Hakuei says with a roll of her eyes. "I'll make sure no one annoying bursts in, and if they do, don't shriek if my breasts are suddenly in your face."

Koumei waves a hand. “Just smother me with them, it’ll be easier. Or turn me over, I doubt anyone would be surprised to find we copulated with me on my belly.”

Impossible not to laugh, at that. "Ah, well, I have a reputation of my own, so that suits me just as well. Now sleep, pathetic one, and we'll deal with more of this in the morning."
Koumei is quiet, for long enough that he might be asleep, when he says softly, pulling his blankets up around his ears, “I miss Ren.”

Hakuei makes a mental note never to get him drunk again, if he brings things like this up. "… Me, too. All of us do." *Ryuu wouldn't be anywhere close to as unstable as he is, had they survived.*

Part of Koumei thinks childishly, but doesn’t say aloud, that if only Yuu and Ren were still alive, none of this would ever have happened.

But Ren Hakuren’s books are in *his* library now, and Ren Hakuyuu’s dagger is on En’s belt, and Ei and Ryuu sit alone on their side of the table. “Ei? What if we have to go through with it?”

"We won't," she firmly replies, yanking a blanket over herself all the way up to her chin. "I'll break En out of that dungeon and run away with him myself before that happens. No offense."

“Why would I take offense to that? More like ask me if I’m offended the horses in the stables don’t want me. Never mind, that was probably only funny to me.” He’s drunk now, and the hallucinations are starting. “Ah. Don’t listen to anything I say for the next couple of hours. I’m talking to the dead.”

"… Go to sleep," Hakuei dryly repeats rather than comment that with his reputation, he *may very well* be offended about horses not wanting him.

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Judal is easily distracted, at least.

More accurately, he's easily *disinterested*, and with Sinbad at his disposal 24/7, that seems to be the case. He's far more fascinated with the news that Kouen is strung up in chains, and Hakuei watches him dart off to investigate just before she makes herself at home in his chambers.

"You look well, at least," Hakuei greets Sinbad as she enters, the door shutting with a *click* behind her as she balances a tray in one hand and turns the lock with the other. He does, at least, and she's glad to see Judal hasn't been *abusing* his so-called 'pet', or letting anyone else do it. He's less chained to the bed at this point, more simply in a collar and in manacles… and she can't quite decide which is better or worse. "I'm not sure what they've been feeding you, but--" The tray is set down upon a low table, and she elegantly sits, gesturing for him to sit with her as she pours some of Kou's finest wine.
"I thought you might appreciate a proper meal while we talk, King Sinbad."

Now *this* is an interesting turn of events.

Sinbad plays his part well, whether it be obedient slave or captive master or bound king, and he inclines his head gratefully now. Ren Hakuei is no one to take lightly, but there’s no reason that whatever she wants couldn’t be beneficial to both of them.

Though he highly doubt she has his best interests at heart. No matter what services he’d rendered her, she’s still a Princess of Kou.

“I appreciate that concern, Highness,” he says with a kind smile. “As you know, a change in cuisine can be stressful to the system, and the food in Kou is a bit rich for my taste.” He invites her to share in his joke, even as he arranges himself properly on the floor in front of the table.

"We'll call it that," Hakuei dryly replies, setting the wine goblet in front of him, as well as his plate. "Don't worry, it isn't poisoned or drugged. I rather need your mental facilities to be fully about you." She laces her fingers together as she settles down across from him. "Certainly you've heard by now what Judal ran off at the speed of light to investigate?"

Sinbad laughs easily at that, taking a long, careless swig of wine--ah, he’d meant it only to prove that he trusted drink from her hand, but the headache and the slight twitching stop as soon as the wine touches his lips, and he sighs gratefully, drinking the goblet half-down before remembering himself. “I've no fear of you, Milady. Though if you wish to converse about my master’s doings, you’ll have to enlighten me. He shares little of his plans with a slave.”

Hakuei tops his wine off the moment the goblet is set down onto the table again. "The Empress has ordered that Koumei and I are to be married," she bluntly informs him, "and En was… less than thrilled. She had him imprisoned."

Sinbad blinks slowly. “That,” he says carefully, “strikes me as…unexpected. Though if you will pardon my saying so, if I would expect a more evil match still from her, rather than a prince of the blood. Perhaps a gardener, or a captured slave? Or is she still playing at a friendly face in front of the court?”

She has to laugh at that as she sits back, hands folded into her lap. "She's doing it not only to anger En, but Ha as well," she simply replies, expression wry. "And neither of them are exactly… cool-
tempered. I'm amazed Ha didn't attack her either, honestly."

*It's more judgment than I'd have given him credit for.* Aloud, Sinbad says only, “But a good thing for you, eh? At least that’s one cousin you won’t lose. So, what use can a lowly slave be to a princess in such an occasion? I rather doubt this is a simple social call, if you don’t mind my impudence in assuming so.”

"I'm not here to play games, Your Majesty." Hakuei forwardly retorts, "so let's just not. I need your cooperation, and if I'm granted it, I will see to it that you are freed and your country unharmed. The Kou Empire's war with Sindria is unneeded and unnecessary, anyway, and I have always said so." She leans forward. "You've been very well-behaved up until this point. I need you not to be, in whatever way that will most effectively anger your 'master.'"

Golden eyes focus intently on Hakuei, and Sinbad’s smile doesn’t fade, but changes subtly. “You will see to it?” he says mildly. “I don’t mean to doubt your word, Your Highness, but if I’d trusted my country’s future to your care the last time you promised to see to your cousin’s temperament, I’d have been disappointed indeed.”

"My cousin is currently in chains in our deepest dungeon; he has absolutely no say in what deals I strike in order to pull him out from it, and I would love to see him argue otherwise," she snorts. "Please don't act as if you don't have a failsafe of your own at play here--more than one, I am sure, even if I am only aware of one."

“A failsafe?” Sinbad laughs, taking another long pull of wine, then relaxing back in a manner most un-slavelike. “A failsafe, your highness, would imply that I were executing a plan, and moreover, that I believed such a plan could fail. You seem very certain that is the case.” He leans forward, setting his elbows on the table and holding her eyes. “What plan is this that you want me to be a part of?”

Hakuei's own eyes lid, her head tilting to the side. "I want the Empress dead," she slowly, firmly answers, "and Kouen on the throne. I have as few options as you do to make this happen. If you follow my instructions, you will see our plans soon enough, and have the added benefit of freedom as well as minus one war with the world's largest empire."

If Sinbad hadn’t been struck by Hakuei’s courage, determination, and stone-hard resolve before, he certainly is now a thousand times more. He bows, slowly, as well as he can while sitting. “I always prefer a strong and sane enemy to a wild and capricious one. No matter what Kouen may choose to do, I’d rather face him than the Empress. But Milady… I won’t agree to any plan that I don’t know fully, or as much as you can tell me without compromising your safety.”
At that, she laughs, and moves to pour him another cup of wine. "I'm afraid if I tell you, you'll open your mouth. Then it's less about my safety and the plan simply not going through because I won't have the leverage I need… pray tell, do you have any ideas about what will make Judal angry enough to throw you away? If not, I can think of a few things."

Sinbad raises an eyebrow, even as he nods in gratitude for the wine. He’s starting to feel normal again, at least, after too long dried out. “If you fear my discretion, are you sure you want me to be part of your plan? Besides, if Judal tires of me he’s more likely to pull off my head rather than casting me away.”

"To be honest, it's less your discretion and more… ah, to hell with it," Hakuei sighs out, having nothing left to lose, anyway. "Our trump card is one and the same," she bluntly retorts. "We need your assassin to kill her, and I know he won't risk it unless there is a more pressing threat over your head pushing him into it. So if your death is imminent, there's a good chance I can strike a deal with him in exchange for your freedom and safety. I think you have something else planned--something he would much prefer to go along with--and that is why I didn't want to tell you. The two of you seem to have… few secrets."

“Or perhaps your brother is correct,” Sinbad says softly, “and he has indeed betrayed me.” He raises an eyebrow, assessing her reaction, and laughs aloud. “Or not. You have a good eye for men’s hearts, I think. I agree with you, keeping secrets from him is the best way to get him to do things. Send him to me, and let Judal come right after. I can make him furious, don’t worry.”

Hakuei relaxes with a long, heavy exhale. "Very well. I will have him sent your way. I do apologize for anything that Judal does, but rest assured I will see you out of here alive and returned to your country by the time this is all through."

“If it is to be, it will be,” Sinbad allows. “Don’t see it as me doubting you, lady, but merely as knowing that we’re dealing with few people who can be counted as sane, and all of them are powerful.”

"I am well aware… and that is why I can only promise alive," she wryly returns. "Besides, I think Judal's affections for you run quite deep. It's a little sad, that we have to manipulate him so, but he's… well. I daresay he's worse than my mother in a number of ways, when it comes to being reasonable."

At the thought of the black box he carries, Sinbad’s stomach turns. “I don’t wish him any harm,” he says quietly, truthfully. “Probably strange, given how much grief he’s given me, but….just because the madness isn’t his fault doesn’t mean he shouldn’t be stopped.”
"Mmn. You really are a good person, I think," Hakuei says, and promptly sets the wine jug down onto the table in front of him. "But first things first—the Empress. I will send Ja'far in your direction. In the meantime, please do enjoy your meal and drink, I did personally prepare it, after all."

The meal is good, the drink better, or at least more of a relief, and Sinbad drinks quite a bit more of the jug than he should, until he’s relaxed and calm again, drifting into an easy sleep that lasts long after Hakuei leaves. For the first time in weeks, his dreams aren’t of death, but of home.

When a servant tells him to stop by Judal's rooms, Ja'far doesn't know what to expect. It certainly isn't a room empty of the Magi in question and one very contently sleeping Sinbad, and the way that the man simply sprawls himself over Judal's bed is far too reminiscent of his sleeping patterns in Sindria to not be a bit… painful.

No, not painful. Stressful, he'll call it that, because the sooner they get out of here, the better. Ja'far heaves a sigh, glancing about the room once more just to make sure he hasn't missed anything before locking the door behind him and setting himself down onto the edge of the bed. "You reek of alcohol," he mutters, reaching a hand out to thumb an errant strand of hair from Sinbad's face while he sleeps. "Who treated you to that vice, hmm?"

“Princess,” Sinbad sighs happily, and an eye cracks open at the soft touch. Aided by the alcohol and the sight of Ja’far after so long, he forgets everything he’d talked about with Hakuei, content for the moment to nuzzle his head onto Ja’far’s lap and the familiar, comforting softness of it. “Miss you.”

Ja'far heaves a sigh, another, brief glance spared to the door before he surrenders for the moment, settling Sinbad's head more comfortably into his lap with his hair gathered up and set to one side. "She must think you're handsome, too. You look well, I'm glad."

“Everyone thinks I’m handsome,” Sinbad murmurs, curling his arms around Ja'far like a child with a stuffed rabbit, drawn to the warmth and the clean familiarity of him. “How’s the food, dining with the royals?”

A roll of his eyes follows, and Ja'far drags his fingers slowly through Sinbad's hair, stroking down the back of his neck. "You know I could eat sand and not know the difference. Should I start taking my meals in my rooms when I can, and sneak them to you?"

“That depends. Are you learning good information?” Sinbad asks hopefully. “I have a feeling things are starting to move. And I eat well enough from Judal’s hand, whenever he remembers. You could bring me wine sometimes, though.”
"I think you can keep doing without the wine." Ja'far sighs, his hand stilling. "And 'moving'… that's an understatement. Just last night, Gyokuen had Kouen thrown into the dungeons after announcing Hakuei and Koumei were to be wed. Model family, this lot."

Sinbad barks out a laugh. “And I thought it was bad enough to have cousins wedding and brothers bedding. This is why inheritance is a bad idea, you know. It breeds insanity, and nothing does that faster than jealousy and incest together.” He pauses. “Maybe. I just made that up.”

"I was about to ask, do you have experience with incest?" Ja'far dryly replies, giving a strand of Sinbad's hair a little pull. "At any rate, now seems to be a good time to go ahead and give that box to Judal. Kouha is home… and I'm fairly certain that Aladdin is among the magicians he captured from Magnoshutatt."

Sinbad narrows his eyes at that. “Doubtless you have some sort of plan, that involves freeing Aladdin and not leaving Gyokuen on the throne when we leave?”

"The virus will spread to her, you know--her rukh's so black you can see it," he mutters, shaking his head in disgust. "And of course I will see to it that Aladdin is freed. Not that he can't free himself, I'm sure; he's only there to keep the rest of them safe, is my guess."

“So do you have a plan to free all his friends? I doubt he'll leave without them.” Sinbad nuzzles against Ja’far’s stomach, thinking. “I don’t like the idea of trusting her to the virus. If magicians can’t overcome the weapon, how could they have locked it up in the first place?”

"Sinbad," Ja'far heavily sighs, a finger jabbing into Sinbad's forehead to keep him from rubbing his face against him, "those magicians that had it locked up probably had pure white rukh. It's easy enough to contain with that in mind. The magicians we're dealing with here are mostly corrupted by Al-Sarmen in some way, and Aladdin said the more black rukh, the faster it spreads. She'll be dead within hours. Quite frankly, what else do you suggest? I watched her take down Kouen without a single bit of effort last night."

“I don’t like this plan,” Sinbad mutters stubbornly, twisting his head to bite Ja’far’s fingertip. “It’s too easy to spread, and it’s devious besides--and what do we leave, the world’s largest, most warlike empire in ruins on our doorstep? That’s hardly safe.”

Ja'far stares down at him incredulously. "You agreed to this. That's why we're here, you know. You can't just go and start changing all of this up after we've both--after you've been in chains, and been
dragged around and called a *slave*.

“Why not?” Sinbad asks, as if it’s the simplest thing in the world. “Plans always change with new information.” He sighs, then admits, “Though I’m starting to think you’re right about at least giving it to Judal. It’s just the ramifications of where it could spread that bother me.”

"It'll *spread* to people this world could do without anyway,“ Ja'far flatly replies. "You *do* realize this is a chance to wipe out a good portion of Al-Sarmen, too, don't you? And what new information could you possibly have that I don't?"

“People the world could do without?” Sinbad asks, raising an eyebrow. “Have you met everyone in this world with black rukh, or some hint of it, Ja’far?”

"I was referring to Al-Sarmen--you know what, I'm going to shove you off this bed and not help you up, which should be amusing *because you're in chains.*"

“Rude,” Sinbad grumbles. “How do you know it won’t spread beyond them, though? To some innocent village, or even to Sindria? Unless I’m very wrong, Judal will still have the chance to *fly* after it hits him, and then who knows what will happen?”

"I'm literally going to take it from you and give it to him myself if you don't *stop*. Why are you so fixated on changing this plan? We've had it for *months*, this is the perfect opportunity to take out the corruption in this empire and be *done* with them."

“Tell me your plan for getting Aladdin and his friends out first,” Sinbad counters. He wriggles his way upright, annoyed at the lack of proper leverage given, as Ja’far has so aptly pointed out, that he’s thoroughly chained up.

Ja'far heaves a sigh. "They're to be… *distributed* at some point. Gyokuen claimed a pair of them, I think Kouha wants Aladdin. The rest, I'm not sure. I have access to every part of this palace, sneaking in and shoving them out *isn't* the most difficult of tasks, you know."

“You think you can make your way into Gyokuen’s private chambers?” That’s one of his questions answered, at least, so Sinbad doesn’t feel quite so bad in the way he leans heavily over onto Ja’far, using his weight to flop down onto the bed with him. “Did I ever tell you your competence is really attractive?”
"I haven't given her a reason to bar me access yet; I'm certain she knows I'm toying with Kouen, she probably finds that attractive," Ja'far shudders, grunting as his back hits the bed. "And here I was worried about being fat. You're heavier, a sedentary lifestyle isn't for you."

Sinbad scowls. “When we leave this place,” he informs Ja'far, “I’m going to swim in the ocean and work the fields every day until you take that back. And until you do, I won’t have time for a single stroke of paperwork.” With that, he leans down, kissing Ja’far’s cheek firmly.

"Good, at least I can burn calories myself doing all of our paperwork," Ja'far sniffs, reaching up to give Sinbad's cheek a pinch. "… But really, my legs aren't fat, are they?"

Sinbad blinks at that, confused. “What? Of course not. I’ve never said they were fat, your legs are lovely. Ah, I could check, if you like,” he suggests with a grin, eyes tracking down.

"It's nothing you said." Ja'far hastily reaches down to hold his robes in place before Sinbad can budge an inch. "And no, thank you. That's not necessary."

“Who said your legs were fat? I’ll fight that person, wherever, whenever.” He snorts, stroking a thumb down Ja’far’s cheekbone, though he turns away at the sight of another fading bruise on his neck. Ah, he’d been so happy to forget what he’d seen last time, and this time it aches all the more. “Though it would pain me to fight someone helpless, as that person is certainly blind.”

"It was just an annoying comment, especially when in conjunction with talk about my scars." Ja'far snorts, lidding his eyes as he tilts his head to the side, allowing himself a moment's indulgence of leaning into Sinbad's touch. "I suppose as long as you don't think they're fat."

“I think every part of you is lovely,” Sinbad says softly, then pulls away. “Especially your scars.” His back bows, and he can’t help but imagine what man, what men might be lifting Ja’far’s robes, littering his throat with bites, hearing him sigh and moan and sliding a hand up to the soft plump warmth of his thighs. “It must have been someone whose opinion you care about, for the words to have any effect.”

That is enough to make him laugh. "Please. Hardly. More like the awkwardness of the situation that makes it stick. You know how sometimes those errant little comments get to you? It's stress, I know." Ja'far's eyes lid, and he shifts, stretching up a leg to prod at Sinbad with his foot. "You're sulking again, stop that."
“Tell me who it is,” Sinbad says quietly. “I have no right to know, but I want you to tell me anyway. I hate it when you keep things from me, and…” His hands clench uselessly, stomach churning with frustration and rage. “If there’s someone else you want, I’d rather know about it. I’ve never hidden my lovers from you.”

It's disgusting, how his stomach twists. When Sin phrases it like that, it really does sound even more awful, what he's doing. "…Want isn't the word," Ja'far mutters, lowering his foot with a frown.

“Is it love, then?” The words are sour in his mouth, and Sinbad can’t look at Ja’far. “I’ve never known you to suffer an unwelcome touch, and there are….it looks like you’ve….ah, don’t listen to me, it’s none of my business and I shouldn’t be upset.”

"How drunk are you?" Ja'far incredulously asks, pushing himself up onto his elbows. "Really, Sin, have you heard of necessities? I'm not interested nor am I selfish enough to compromise this mission or plan just because I don't want to lie with someone. You'd be killed if I refused, because they'd know quicker than anything that I'm not loyal."

“Then why hide it from me?” Sinbad demands. “Why couch it in pretty words and vague pronouns and pretend it was bandits on the road if you think it was so simple as that?”

Ah, he's done. To hell with it, Sinbad will do as he likes, anyway, and already seems to be far from interested in following their well-laid plans. "Because it's Kouen, and now that you know, you'll attempt to burst from this room and kill him with your bare hands. I know how you are." He collapses backwards, the weight of having just said it finally off of his shoulders. "Do me a favor and prove me wrong."

Sinbad exhales a slow breath, hands clenching until his knuckles crack and pop. When he looks up, finally, there’s less of anger in his eyes than grief. “You should never have had to do that. Go home. I’ll keep to the plan, you have my word.”

"Stop it, he's in the bloody dungeons now," Ja'far mutters, rolling onto his side with a snort. "You're right, I shouldn't have had to do it. Men are disgusting animals, I'll never be convinced otherwise."

Just now, Sinbad is tempted to agree with him. “Save that you’re one of our number, I wouldn’t argue with that.” He closes his eyes, folding his legs as comfortably under himself as he can. “I mean it. If I’d done as you said at the beginning, this wouldn’t have happened. Name your price from me, your reward or my punishment, whatever you would have.”
"I hardly have the urges of most men," Ja'far sighs at him, flopping entirely onto his stomach a moment later. "Sin, just drop it. It probably would have happened regardless, Kouen is… well, when he's fixated, he's certainly something. Don't speak of it again and I'll be satisfied."

“If that’s your wish.” Sinbad is still too quiet, and he has trouble meeting Ja'far’s eyes. “It’s different with me, isn’t it? You don’t just...suffer my touches because it’s easier than pushing me away?”

Ja'far twists his head around to stare at him. "You're joking, right? After all the times I have forcibly removed you and nearly toppled you off of a balcony because you've annoyed me so? I believe I've made it very clear when I do and when I don't want your hands on me. I have no trouble saying no.”

That’s at least one worry assuaged, and, Sinbad relaxes a little. “I have to wonder,” he mutters. “I...for better or worse, this isn’t anything I thought I’d have to deal with. I thought if there was one thing I could count on--that’s not meant as a criticism of you,” he adds hastily.

Confusion furrows his brow, and Ja'far rolls back over to look at him properly. "… But there isn't anything to deal with. I can assure you, I didn't enjoy having his hands on me. Well," he mutters crossly, flushing, "not on purpose."

“I know full well that I’m less than entirely logical when it comes to you,” Sinbad admits. “I simply….ahh, you know full well that if you wanted to suffer my constant attentions I could live without any others. You needn’t act like you don’t understand my feelings when I’ve told them to you plainly.”

"… But I don't care if you're with anyone else." Ja'far's head tilts, quizzical. "You'd hardly be happy, being confined to one person. As long as you aren't endangering yourself or Sindria, I don't see any harm in it--it isn't as if I can keep up with you on the best of days, anyway."

“Well, I care if you’re with someone else,” Sinbad says, a litte grumpy now. “And likely I shouldn’t, and it’s wrong and selfish, but I’ve decided I don’t care, so you’ll have to deal with me caring.”

"But I don't want to be with anyone else?” Are they going to talk in circles like this for ages? Ja'far huffs, frowning. "I can assure you, this was an anomaly."

Sinbad starts to fold his arms, but the chains rattle and stop him, and he lets them fall again. “Ah. Well, good. I still think we should give the ring to Kouen and leave. I mean, Judal.”
Ja’far can’t help but laugh. “Either's fine,” he snorts. "Though I think it'll spread more if given to Judal. Amazing, how fast you go back to the original plan now. I should have just told you sooner.”

Sinbad reaches over and clasps one of Ja’far’s hands. “Yes, you should have. Because I didn’t know my delays were causing you grief and pain.”

"I thought you'd go after him," Ja’far admits, his fingers squeezing tight about Sinbad's hand. "You're proving me wrong right now, I'm slightly proud."

“Only slightly? When it’s taking all my energy and willpower?” Sinbad leans over, resting his head on Ja’far’s shoulder. “I just can’t stand the thought of you being hurt for my mistakes. On your own, fine, you’re an adult, and one of the strongest and most capable I’ve ever met, but not for my sins.”

"This plan wasn't all your idea, you know, give me a little bit of credit," Ja’far murmurs, sliding his hands up to rest upon Sinbad's shoulders. "I told you to wait until Kouha returned. He just did that a sparse few days ago, it isn't as if you could have acted much sooner.”

“But you didn’t need to be here,” Sinbad points out. “You should be safe home in Sindria watching our people and making sure that no one thinks you a traitor.”

"Then who would have gotten you out of here after you gave Judal that ring?” Ja'far sighs out, digging his nails in as a gentle chide. "And you'd also be dealing with this entirely blind. At least I can feed you information from time to time."

Sinbad turns his head, pressing a kiss against one of the few unmarked spots of his neck. “Not worth it,” he declares simply. “At least he’s in the dungeons now, and won’t be bothering you again.”

"… This really bothers you, doesn't it?” Ja'far murmurs, his eyes lidding as he leans back, allowing the touch for now. "I never thought you were this possessive. You have to know it means absolutely nothing--less than nothing. In fact, I was angry at myself for even tolerating it."

“I never thought I was this possessive either,” Sinbad admits. “It’s hardly a pleasant surprise to discover about myself. I don’t think I like it, to be perfectly honest. I just…” He leans against Ja’far’s shoulder, sighing. “I don’t like seeing his touch on you. It makes me want to scrub you clean.”

"I can assure you I've done that a million times over thus far--and five million and a half baths later, it
still makes my skin crawl," Ja'far admits on a shudder, sliding his hands back through Sinbad's hair to pull him down. "I'll get over it, once we're done here."

Sinbad grins, rolling happily on top of Ja'far as much as his chains will allow. "Any new scars that I'll get to discover? He--he's not too similar to me, is he? I know we frequently have similar taste."

"... Just in build, mostly, not so much in taste," Ja'far allows with a wrinkle of his nose. "It... well." He can feel his skin heating already. "It made it easier to pretend that it wasn't him. He was the one that commented about my legs, after all; only thought they would be nice after someone fixed my scars. Rude."

Anger flares in Sinbad at that, as well as utter confusion. "How--I don’t understand, your scars are--how can he--" He shakes his head in disbelief. "At least I know he wasn’t looking closely at you. He must have been trying to imagine someone else, because there’s no one lovelier than you, especially your scars and the curve of your legs."

"I think maybe you have a bias," Ja'far wryly says, though he can't help the pleased little ripple of warm that spreads up his spine all the same. "It's all well and good if he doesn't like them, it was more the way he said it that irked me."

Sinbad pauses, bringing up a hand to cup Ja’far’s face. “Let’s neither of us mention him again, especially when I’m lying atop you like this,” he suggests. “Then he’ll be truly defeated, and I can kiss you without thinking of Kouen’s pathetic little beard getting in the way.”

Ja'far chokes. "I really hate that beard," he announces, flopping his arms over Sinbad's shoulders with a long sigh. "You're never allowed to grow one. I'll kill you myself."

Sinbad makes a face. “Why would I want to? At best it looks like a shadow, at worst like he’s got food stuck to his chin. Besides, I’m handsome and virile enough without a beard, don’t you think?"

"You certainly look fine enough without one, and doubtlessly a dozen times more pleasant to kiss," Ja'far allows, and slides one hand down, absently grasping for the chains that bind Sinbad's wrists. "I could pick these locks, you know."

Sinbad laughs, louder than he should, and leans down to kiss Ja’far slow and soft, sucking a lip into his mouth to nibble on. “I could break them with a motion,” he says, mirth dancing in his eyes. “They’re ceremonial only, and the only reason we don’t leave is because the true cuffs are the
promises of Sindria being sunk, and they know that. So…let’s hasten along the day when that won’t be true, eh?”

It’s a relief, an enormous one, that the closeness of Sinbad, the warmth of him and his simple touch lights his body on fire more than Kouen ever did. A traitorous thing, those reactions; nothing like this, no matter how he tries to fight this, too, for the sake of their safety. “… Don't kiss me like that,” he mutters, though it's a weak protest as he shivers, even when coupled with the lifting of one hand to grasp at Sinbad's face and pushing back. "You know we could be easily interrupted."

Sinbad draws back slightly, enough to rest chained hands on Ja’far’s chest. “The only reason I will ever not kiss you when I want to,” he says, eyes locked intently on Ja’far’s, “is because you don’t want me to. So if you don’t want my lips on yours, say so, or let me kiss you.”

"… It's not that." The opposite, really, Ja'far miserably thinks, shutting his eyes in an attempt to get ahold of himself. "I just told you why you shouldn't, it's not safe."

Sinbad ignores him, lowering his face and claiming his lips in another long, slow kiss. The warmth of him seeps across, and all the cold nights at the foot of a bed or curled up on the floor bleed away, leaving Sinbad reveling in nothing but the taste of Ja'far’s mouth.

Damn it all.

This isn't exactly fair, not when he's wanted this--or rather, needed it, all the better to shove aside thoughts of Kouen's touch and why this is so much better. Ja'far groans in spite of himself, the sound muffled to a rumbling low in his throat, and his hands grab too-fast for Sinbad's hair, pulling him down as he arches up with a hot breath escaping through his nose.

The feel of Ja’far is too good under him, reminding Sinbad more than anything why they need to go home, why no matter what they accomplish here, there’s nothing more important than being with the ones he loves in the place he loves, that such a thing is the very foundation of his country. “Can’t wrap my arms around you,” he murmurs against Ja’far’s lips, the chains clinking together, “so you just hold me for both of us, all right?”

Ja'far grumbles in the back of his throat at that, his head tilting up to better nip at Sinbad's lower lip, tugging in open annoyance. "I told you I could pick the lock on those things," he mutters, but slides his hands from Sinbad's hair all the same, wrapping his arms more securely about the man's back as his legs spread to cradle Sinbad's hips between them as well. "Judal will never know the difference."
Sinbad laughs between kisses, and kisses him several more times to make up for it. “You don’t want
to kiss me for fear that he’ll walk in, but you don’t mind if he sees the cuffs are picked? Mind you, I
was just going to kiss you, but if you want me so badly…”

The blush on his face darkens considerably. "I was going to make it so he didn't even notice. But
fine, just kiss me, then, if that's all you want."

Sinbad kisses Ja’far again, tasting his mouth and the unfamiliar spices of Kou, laying and shifting his
weight to make sure he can feel Ja’far, every bit of him, and sure enough, his resolution falters
quickly. “Wrap your legs around me a bit?” he asks, hopefully. “Love them, want to feel them.”

Just those few simple words shouldn't make desire curl so tightly in the pit of his stomach, certainly
shouldn't make him shiver or make his toes curl when he shifts, pressing his thighs to either side of
Sinbad's hips with a gentle squeeze of them. "You'll be the end of us both, you know," Ja'far
murmurs, exhaling a slow breath as his hands smooth down Sinbad's spine, just barely resisting the
urge to wriggle up against him.

Sinbad’s eyes flutter shut, and he lets out a blissful groan. No matter how sweet Judal smells or how
wicked his teeth are, Ja’far is….home. Nothing feels like being cradled between those familiar
thighs, rocking slowly above his most trusted friend. “I hope so,” he murmurs, setting his lips across
freckled cheeks. “Otherwise it would be someone else’s fault, and I wouldn’t like that at all.”

"You're the worst," Ja'far half-groans, half-laughs, surrendering now to that urge, a careful arch of
his back, an upward press of his hips making him hiss out and squeeze his legs tighter about Sinbad's
waist. "Ahh… and you're not. fair, either," he breathes, eyes fluttering as his head tips back. "How
long has it been now anyway…"

“Too long. Months.” Sinbad shivers, thinking of all that time on the road, all that time at the foot of
Judal’s bed, helpless, frustrated, useless. “Tell me you’ve missed me as I’ve missed you, and I’m not
alone in my hunger.” He’s hard already against one pale thigh, no matter how he’d teased about
leaving it at only kisses.

"I've probably missed you more." Normally, the words would be long in coming, something that
flutters him or doesn't feel quite right on his tongue, but right now, it's the exact opposite. Sinbad
feels so good above him, the weight and breadth and warmth of him enough to drive him mad, and
Ja'far swallows another groan, an upward twitch of his hips bringing his own achingly hard cock to
grind against Sinbad's through fabric. "You have no idea… how much I wanted you to be the one
scrubbing away every trace of him."
“I will,” Sinbad promises, and sets his teeth over one of the bruises, scraping as if he could suck away the color and touch of someone else ever on Ja’far’s skin. “We’ll find every spring on the way home and bathe until neither of us can remember the taste of anyone but each other, or any other hands.” He grinds down, kissing Ja’far’s eyelids at the same time as he rolls his hips. “Can you see it now? The stars, and the sand, and the water, and me?”

Ja’far’s mouth opens to protest, to tell Sinbad not to bite or leave marks, someone will see and question who that assassin slut is rolling around with now, but all that comes out is a breathy, broken sound, muffled when he grits his teeth. "You're such a romantic idiot," he raggedly laughs, his hips lurching upward to desperately grind up against Sinbad as his nails scrape down his back, curling in to tightly cling. "God, that does sound good, though. I--… S-Sin, I really…” Another, pointed shudder, and Ja’far bites his own lip as a hand snakes down, grabbing a little too desperately, a little too hungrily for Sinbad's cock. "In me. Please."

Sinbad tries to reach for his cock as he tries to reach for the oil, and the yank of the chains makes him pitch forward on top of Ja’far’s chest. “Damn it,” he curses, “pick them in a few seconds or I’m ripping them off, I need you now.”

"Heavy bastard," Ja'far grunts, but grabs for Sinbad's wrists all the same at the same time that he fumbles into a pocket of his robes. It's less easy now that his hands are shaky and his arms are shivery, of course. "I told you I should have done this before. Why do you never listen to me? Ugh, there," he mutters, thankful that the damned manacles are definitely only for show, and he yanks at them, pleased when they fall away from Sinbad's wrists in short order.

Sinbad wastes no time, using his newfound freedom to slide his hands over every part of Ja’far he can reach, caressing and stroking and pinching when he can, spreading his advisor’s legs and gliding up hard between them, cursing as he remembers. “Let’s hope Judal doesn’t notice any of this missing,” he mutters, splayed his cock as he slides up, barely pausing before he guides himself inside. He has to choke off a groan, at the familiar, too-perfect squeeze of it, and his hands tighten on Ja’far’s waist more than they should, with no heed at all to the fact that someone else might see--ah, but Kouen’s in the dungeon, and he doesn’t care.

Ja'far hurriedly lifts a hand of his own to clamp over his own mouth, muffling the broken, sort of squeaking groan that tries to escape when Sinbad sinks into him. Wrong, very wrong, to think Kouen is anything like him. Sinbad is so much hotter inside of him, thick and long and so hard it makes him tremble, his knees spaying wide apart and his toes curling until the muscles even in his calves twitch and ache. Better--or is it worse?--still is the grab and squeeze of Sinbad’s hands, making his eyes roll back when that grasp only seems to make the fit of Sinbad inside of him that much more difficult, and Ja'far groans, weakly rutting down, squirming to stuff more of that big cock inside of himself. "P… please…"

Sinbad sets his teeth to a freckled shoulder, wanting to see if he can taste them, even though he
knows after so many years that he can’t, wanting to devour him, even as he slides up hard and fast inside him. “Everything you want,” he breathes, a groan spilling from his throat as he rolls his hips. “Anything, everything, let me--”

He doesn’t have the words, cradling Ja’far in his arms as he thrusts harder and harder, hands bruising, sweat beading between his shoulderblades as his thighs bunch. “Just--like this, need you, like this--”

A helpless nod follows as Ja’far’s arms wrap tight around Sinbad’s shoulders again, clinging to his back as he arches down, eager to be yanked and pulled into every hard thrust of Sinbad’s hips. He was wrong, and god, that’s enough relief for a century--wrong, to think his body had betrayed him when he never felt anything like this with Kouen. Sinbad is something entirely different, warm and strong and cradling him and biting and kissing him, fucking him like something to be worshipped, and god it feels good just to arch his back and grind his cock into Sinbad’s stomach, never mind the way his cock feels inside, stretching him wide and hitting so deep that his eyes flutter and skin flushes even hotter.

Ja’far feels different inside than anyone else. Sinbad doesn’t know how, but even blindfolded he’d be able to tell in a second that it’s Ja’far. He mutters something to the effect against Ja’far’s throat, unintelligible and lost, rough, urgent noises in his throat that bely how close he is, how desperate. One hand slides down Ja’far’s chest, rubbing roughly over a nipple before he wraps it around Ja’far’s cock, stroking and pulling in quick jerks along with the slap of his hips. “With me,” he pleads, kissing Ja’far’s face, his lips, every bit of him he can reach. “Please, I can’t--”

Sinbad isn’t fair.

Ja’far's mind effectively clicks off, his teeth worrying into his lower lip to keep his voice back as his brow furrows, his eyes squeezing shut with every tight, rough slide of Sinbad's hand, every upward buck of his hips, and ah, god, the brief pull of his fingers over that nipple just isn't enough. One hand moves unbidden, pinching, pulling at his own nipple as his breath catches hard, swallowing around a whine as he jerks up, rutting against Sinbad's hand, down into the tight, aching press of his cock as he comes, tears leaking from his eyes as every muscles twitches and spasms, and god, it's everything he can do not to scream.

No matter how lost Sinbad is, he notices, feels every motion, and that tiny little motion of Ja’far moving to pinch his own nipple undoes him completely. It’s something so lewd, something Ja’far would only do because he truly, honestly wants this. It’s with the last of his doubts wiped away that Sinbad loses himself, muffling a shout into Ja’far’s shoulder as he slams deep inside, spending himself with a shudder and a noise that’s more alike to a whine than anything. “You,” he pants, pressing a sloppy kiss to the side of Ja’far’s neck, hitting part of his ear on accident. “Ah, god, when we’re home...let’s do that every day, love.”
"I'll die," Ja'far groans as he flops back, eyes fluttering at the thought all the same, an arm coming to drape over his face as he still pants raggedly while coming down from his high. "You're… no way in hell… can I keep up with you."

“Probably not,” Sinbad says with a laugh, stroking a hand down Ja’far’s side, “but don’t you think it would be fun to try?”

"I just told you I'll die," Ja'far bemoans, though he sounds less annoyed and more amused. "Do you really want that to happen?"

"Yeah. Pretty sure."

Shock bolts up his spine, and he jerks upright, nearly knocking his head into Sinbad's in the process. Judal sits casually in his own window, eyebrows arched high. "Geez, give you a day minus Kouen, and you jump ship yet again. You really are a whore of a snake."

Ah, shit.

Sinbad thinks fast, but acts slow, knowing that Judal isn’t stupid, knows him better than to think he’d feel any kind of remorse for something like this. He stretches back, shrugging as he leans back on his elbows. “Didn’t even take too much convincing,” he says with a grin, meeting Ja’far’s eyes for a brief second. “He knows where the wind is blowing. You want to throw in your lot too, Master?"

Judal's eyes narrow. "No. And don't fucking mock me by calling me that, I know you don't give a shit."

He leaps off the windowsill, stretching like a cat. "Get out, Freckles. I don't give a shit where you think the wind is blowing--don't touch my property."

Ja'far opens his mouth, then shuts it again as he wriggles away, reaching down to smooth his robes as he throws his legs over the side of the bed. "My apologies, I--"

"Don't. Get out."
It's *impossible* to pander to Judal, especially when the Magi shares a mutual hatred with him. Ja'far spares Sinbad a last glance before hurrying to the door, not waiting for the air to get a single degree colder. *Just give him the damned box already.*

Judal glares at the door as it slams shut, and flatly says without looking at Sinbad, "I don't really recall saying slaves could sleep on my bed, let alone *fuck* anyone in it that isn't me."

"What would you have had me do?" Sinbad asks, a hint of an edge to his voice even as he slinks back to the floor, putting the cuffs back on himself, wincing at the bite of the cold metal on the fast, hot blood pumping through his body. "Do you know what a slave is? I have no power to refuse a guest in the halls of my master. He has the favor of the powers of this land, does he not?"

"Why was he even here?" Judal snaps out, his foot slamming into Sinbad's shoulder, shoving him hard against the foot of the bed and holding him there. "*Don't* tell me a bunch of bullshit lies, Sinbad. He betrayed you, and you'd take him back so easily?! Don't tell me you're *that* smitten with him."

Sinbad hisses out a breath, making no effort to escape no matter the pain of Judal's foot--a lot of pressure when he's putting effort into making it *hurt.* "Who said I'd take him back?" he asks, eyes dark and narrowed. "I wanted to find out what he *knew.* Seems he's weary of Kouen's bed now that it's empty--and you never told me what was going on in the palace, so I have to take my information where I can get it!"

"Bullshit, all of it," Judal sneers, grinding his heel in. "Do you think I don't have ears or something? Calling him 'love', petting him like he's something pretty and *precious*, both you and Kouen make me *sick.* What the fuck is so special about him that you all keep running back even after he's screwed you over?" A snort, and he yanks his foot away, hissing out an annoyed breath. "I don't even fucking want to look at you. I wonder what he'd do if you're both in the dungeons--ahh, and you're not *off-limits* down there to *poke at*, not like Kouen."

Sinbad lurches up against that foot, only to let it pin him down again, teeth grinding as he tries to remind himself this is what he *wants,* this was the *plan.* It doesn't feel like a good plan. But if this is the real Judal, if he's someone willing to throw a slave to be tortured in the dungeons for having affection for someone else….

Maybe Ja’far is right. Maybe there isn’t anything worth saving.

Sinbad raises an eyebrow. "Maybe you weren’t watching long enough. Or didn’t you get to see
enough of his charms?" That ought to do it.

Judal's teeth clench, the twitch in his jaw belying how difficult it is not to simply draw his wand right then and there. "If I didn't know any better," he breathes, "I'd say you want me to fuck you over. Fine, then."

He turns away, wrenching open his door. "Hey, guards! Come take this piece of shit down for me. I don't want to look at him for the rest of the weekend. Maybe then," he adds in a lower voice, "you'll learn that snake isn't worth it."
Chapter 12

“If you are the kind of man I think you are, you’ll listen to me.”

Koumei walks in silently, feet making no noise as he lists slightly to one side, eluding a trap wire as easily as if he’d leaned over because he couldn’t bear to stay upright. The belladonna has been clear from his system for days, though it had done wonders for his skin and eyes while it lasted, which was a nice change. Days of being without Kouha, propelled to the front of national consciousness with the news (spread far and wide, that witch) of his impending marriage to his cousin, however, had taken a toll, and he’s as sallow as ever, dark circles under his eyes. He leans back against the inside of the closed door of Ja’far’s room, hands folded into his sleeves, dark eyes hooded as he watches the man intently.

*Three days in a dungeon for your supposedly beloved master. A week for En. What are you still doing here when you have no strings left to pull, except that you’re waiting for something?*

“So, do I have your attention?”

Ja'far barely spares him a lifting of his head, though a deft flick of his wrist rolls up the scroll in his lap in short order. It's nigh impossible not to fret, though he thinks he's keeping the expression from his face well enough. Days, since Judal threw Sinbad to the dungeons on a whim, and he still hasn't had any luck at gaining access to Magnoshutatt's captured magicians, himself. "I'm not certain what sort of man you think I am, but I doubt it's anything good," he dryly replies, eyes lidded when he finally does lift his gaze. "Oh, congratulations on your marriage, by the way, Your Highness."

“My thanks. And for the rest of it, disregarding what I feel about you personally, I at least think you’re a shrewd man, and not one to throw away an opportunity.” Don’t sit down, Mei. You can do it, just stand up for like, five minutes. Ugh, it’s been a long time since breakfast, Kouha didn’t look good…

“Are you as good as my brother seems to think you are?”

An eyebrow raises. "I've been told I'm good at a great many things." This is a new one. Whatever job Koumei is trying to enlist him into is probably nothing he wants a part of, though. "Unfortunately, I'm a bit expensive, or so I've been told.”

“I can pay.”
This must be one hell of a job. Ja'far wonders how awful of a person he's allowed to be, if it involves freeing Kouen from the dungeons. He'd sooner sneak down there and snatch Sinbad up and leave Kouen to rot instead. "Really. Then let's hear about it already."

Koumei starts to slump down onto a chair, and catches himself at the last second, asking as evenly as he can, “Can you kill a witch?”

Oh.

Well.

Didn't quite see that one coming.

"… You definitely can't afford what that would cost," Ja'far dismissively retorts, turning away with a shake of his head.

“Not a king and a country?” Koumei’s voice is quiet, but it carries, his own magic spilling out not over Ja'far, but to be certain no spells are listening. There could always be physical ears, of course, and that’s why he’s ever more vigilant.

"You misunderstand me. I'm an assassin, and my loyalties can be quite fluid." Ja'far offers him a light shrug. "A shame Kouen has gotten himself imprisoned. We did work well together."

“Of course.” Koumei crosses his arms over his chest. “Of course, you’re ever so loyal to my brother. Never mind my offer, then. And when you wrest your king from his dungeons, no matter what you have in mind, bear it always at the back of your thoughts that even if Judal was the one who found the secret to sinking your island, he’s not the only one capable of it.”

Ja'far's stare is bland, no matter how his heart thuds a little faster within his chest. "My island? Try again. My connections to Sindria have long been severed, save for my authority over her people."

Koumei lets out a huff of laugh, cruel and cold and dismissive. “Fine, then. Keep up your act, and let your king find out what delights are in store for him tonight and tomorrow. I’ve gotten a sampling of the menu, it’s….well, if he were faint of heart he’d never have become king, would he?” He
shrugs, opening the door. “Never mind, then.”

Damn it.

How this one figured out that he and Sinbad are still connected is beyond him, but Ja'far supposes if anyone were to do it, it would be Koumei. "You can guarantee nothing," he shortly retorts before Koumei can leave. "How, exactly, do you intend to render payment when she's watching you all hours of the day and night?"

“She won’t be watching me,” Koumei says easily, shutting the door again, “when she’s dead. I’m not alone in this offer. I do have the power to give you not only your king back, but the country you two love so much as well.”

"Your word isn't good enough," Ja'far bluntly replies. "Out of the dungeons tonight, and I'll actually start planning."

“What about Ei’s word?” Koumei asks, raising an eyebrow. “She seems to think she owes your king some kind of debt. I don’t really care, but she seems highly intent on repaying it. Should I tell her her word isn’t good enough for you?”

"By all means, tell her. No one's word in this empire is good enough unless accompanied by results. For such a large empire, your success rate for such things is abysmally low."

Koumei’s jaw tightens. “What about your word? You’ve never done a thing for me, and I’ve never seen you carry out a kill. How do I know you haven’t gone soft, or incompetent?”

Oh, that's worthy of an eye roll. "Do you really think it doesn't benefit me to kill that witch, aside from Sinbad's freedom? That being said, if you want proof of my skills, I can always test them on your little brother. I don't have enough fingers to count his openings."

There’s a dagger in Koumei’s hand before he realizes he’s moved, and he takes a deep breath, returning it to its sheathe, cursing his obvious reaction. “Where will you keep him, if I free him from the dungeons tonight?”

Ja'far tilts his head back, thinking. "The magicians captured from Magnoshutatt have yet to be handed out, correct? Throw him with them. If you think I don't have my own men watching there,
you're wrong. If someone does ask, say it's an order and he's to be sold as a statement against Sindria. Anyone that could give such an order will be dead soon enough anyway, and Judal won't have time to argue about it."

Koumei narrows his eyes. “Don’t tell me what to say, I can handle my own guards. And Judal, if that comes down to it. But it would still be in your best interests to work quickly.” Slowly, he holds out his hand. “Do we have an understanding?”

"Oh, yes, I'm sure you can handle them just fine," Ja'far can't help but snidely quip, even as he eyes Koumei's hand for a second before reaching out to take it. "So long as your end of the bargain is kept, we have a deal."

Ah, he has really got to work on his reputation, if this kind of thing is becoming common awareness, especially after Hakuei’s odd pause about the stables. Then again, working on his reputation sounds awfully tedious. He shakes Ja'far’s hand once, then lets it go as if it’s infected. “I’ll have him out before midnight. When can you have the deed done?”

"Once I verify that he's out? Probably by the same time tomorrow, lest she keeps an entourage of five dozen Al-Sarmen magicians for the day."

“Sooner is better than later,” Koumei says mildly. “The longer you wait, the longer she’ll have to figure out something’s happening. She took En out in a moment, she’s--ah, but you’ll remember that.” He shrugs a shoulder, weary of the conversation. “Good luck.”

"I hardly need luck, but thank you." Really, as if he needs a reminder of what she's capable of. God, but Ja'far will be glad when he can go back to pushing paperwork 24/7, he was supposed to be done with this particular lifestyle.

Koumei hates this, all the sneaking around and dealing with people, all the stopping to hear himself congratulated by people who think he’s been getting Hakuei pregnant, hatefully enough. No fewer than three guards attempt to drink his toast on his way to the cells, and two of them are ones that had of late been transferred from his own employ. Really, as if they don’t know better. It takes little bribery and less convincing to get the guards to acquiesce to his request, only the bored self-assurety of royalty something he really needs to get his way.

They’re palace guards, which makes everything easier, even if he does have to give (not that he minds overmuch) a hurried blowjob in the corner to keep them from doing any paperwork. Ah, he misses the taste of Kouha already, but he consoles himself with watching the guards take the battered and bruised form of Sindria’s former king to the cells with the magicians.
Then he goes to bed, ignoring Hakuei on the couch, miserable and cold in bed and unsure how much longer he can stand it.

Kouha thinks he should get a medal in wall-scaling at this point.

Why does Koumei's room have to be so damnably high up? He could, of course, hop on a magic carpet, but that's far too noticeable. Scaling the wall, scrambling up onto the balcony, and sneaking in through windows is his only solution, and he figures at least this is good practice for some wartime maneuver…

The last bit is less than graceful, though, which is when he catapults himself into Koumei's bed with an audible oof of breath. "This is awful," he bemoans into a pillow. "Can we just kill her already?"

Koumei rolls onto Kouha without a second’s pause, holding him as tightly as his arms can manage, holding him until he hears something creak. “We are,” he promises, gathering him up and promising inwardly to never let him go. “It’s happening, it’ll be done by tomorrow night.”

Kouha blinks at that, a hand on Koumei’s chest to push him back a fraction of an inch, all the better to actually look at him. "Wait, what? How? No offense, Mei, but you can't kill her."

Koumei groans, burying his face in his brother’s chest. “Forget I said it, I wasn’t supposed to say anything, just…trust me.” He doesn’t want to look at Hakuei, knowing how exasperated she’ll look, but keeping secrets from Ha is harder than keeping secrets from anyone else.

"Nooo, now you've brought it up, I wanna know," Kouha lowly insists, pulling on Koumei's hair. "How's she dying? I don't have to do anything, do I? If I do, you need to tell me, I wanna be ready to end that bitch."

“Mmm, you’re fine, we’ve got it all taken care of.” I hope. If not, we’re rid of an obnoxious assassin. “Just make sure you’re well out of it, make sure you’re in your room tomorrow night. And stay there, as much as I want you here.” He buries his face in Kouha’s neck, kissing now.

"Ahh, I wanna watch, though…” he grumbles, but settles back all the same, sliding a hand down Koumei's back. "I guess as long as it happens, then whatever. I'm getting tired of sneaking around, I just wanna curl up with you again."
“I’m trying,” Koumei murmurs. “Wish I could drain her, wish she didn’t know my tricks so well. That’s annoying. But I promise once we’re rid of the witch we’ll just curl up for as long as you want, all right?” And it still won’t be as long as I want.

"Mm. Good." Kouha butts his head against his brother's shoulder, hiding his frown. "...You definitely don't want to marry Hakuei, right?"

Koumei pulls back, startlement and disgust apparent on his face. “Definitely not,” he says firmly, shuddering at the very thought of it. “Really, really definitely not.”

Relief is the only thing reflected across Kouha’s. "Good. I mean, I knew that, but I wanted to hear it all the same. En would kill you, anyway, and... I don't really see you, uh, taking care of babies."

Koumei makes a face, barely stopping himself from gagging. “No offense to either of them, but I really don’t want any part of it. Of them or babies. Although,” he adds, laying down again to pillow his head on Kouha’s belly, “I’d like your babies.”

"If I was a woman, I'd have your babies," Kouha happily replies, sliding a hand slowly through Koumei’s hair. "And I bet we'd have an easier time of it than En, by far."

Koumei smiles, nuzzling into the touch, inhaling deeply and nosing up the hem of Kouha’s shirt, resting his cheek against the bare skin of his navel. “Of course we would, your mother was no one. Both sides of En’s child are going to be Rens, all the way back.”

"Pretty sure ours would be prettier," Kouha lowly adds, an amused grin on his face at that. "And we’d probably, you know, actually have to be careful, or I'd be having a kid every damned year. You actually work properly."

“Mmm, then it’s probably a good thing you’re not a woman,” Koumei points out, amused and more intrigued than he should be by the idea. “I don’t think either of us would want the hassle of being careful. And how do you know I work properly? I certainly haven’t sired any bastards that I know of.”

"Shhh, I just know these things. I mean, our father sure as hell was busy, there's a really good chance you're just as capable."
Koumei shrugs, trailing a finger down Kouha’s chest, twirling it around a strand of pink. “Pity we’ll never find out. You’ve got me interested in the idea.”

"… Can't rukh do that? Ahh, never mind, bad idea, bad idea," Kouha sighs, letting his head loll back. "I'd be obnoxious as a woman, anyway."

Koumei laughs, low and easy, and everything seems possible and stress-free when Kouha’s in his arms again. “You’d be the only woman who could hold my attention, that’s for sure. Oh, but En would kill us.”

"En has enough to worry about--I’m still not getting married any time soon," Kouha grumbles. "No matter what he says."

“You should have a nice wife,” Koumei says, but his heart isn’t in it, and he’s pretty sure that’s obvious. “And lots of babies that I can spoil. Someone’s got to, and I doubt En’ll get more than one.”

“'Nice' wives are boring, babies are boring, just spoil me,” is Kouha’s immediate protest as he buries his face into his brother’s neck. "I'm better."

Koumei wriggles down, pulling the blankets around both of them. “No arguments here.”

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So far, being a captured slave isn’t that bad.

It’s a lot nicer here in the palace than it had been the first time Aladdin had been taken as a slave, with the crying children and the disease and everyone sure they were going to die. This is a lot more like being a prisoner, he thinks, since no one is trying to make them work, at least not yet.

Still, it’s nice to be away from everyone else for a little while, since everyone’s so sad all the time, all talking about Magnoshuttat and what’s in store for them and whether they’ll make it out alive, and the fact that it’s Kouha that pulls him out of the cell is probably the best news of all.
Aladdin walks ahead, walking backwards as he smiles. “You look a lot nicer today than in Magnoshuttat!” he says, clasping his manacled hands in front of himself, looking up at the pink-haired man. “Is this your house? Where are your pretty servants?”

In a way, Kouha is immensely glad that he's the one that laid claim on this one. Not only because he's a Magi—that's just a huge bonus, really—but because he's still just a kid. Even he has a few mercies left in him, at least when it comes to people that have slept within a foot of him for a good week and a half and tried to flirt with his servants.

"Busy," he sighs, dropping a hand on Aladdin's head to turn him 'round. "Hey, walk like a normal person. I don't care, but people'll start talking about what I let my slaves get away with. Did they feed you yet?"

“Not enough,” Aladdin says cheerfully, easily turning around to walk more properly. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to get you in trouble. Hey, is that weird lady who came to look at my friends your mom? She said she was the Emperor. Are you gonna be Emperor when you’re older?"

"Step-mother, definitely no blood relation," Kouha says with a wrinkle of his nose, barely managing not to gag. "And no, I'm not gonna be emperor." That's En's job.

"Nah, you're just gonna get shipped off to some foreign country to marry their princess."

Judal's hands are on his shoulders—not annoying in and of itself, but it's the words that make him twitch more than anything. "Aren't you made of sunshine today?" Kouha drawls, his head twitching around to glare at the other Magi as he comes to a stop in the hall.

"Bored," is his succinct reply, sharp red eyes immediately falling upon Aladdin. "Let me borrow him."

"Oh, no way. Not after you tossed yours to the dungeon," Kouha mutters, swatting at Judal's hands.

"If you don't share, I'll whine to Gyokuen."

Wow, Judal's in a foul mood today. Commentary about being a jealous, jilted lover is on the tip of his tongue, but Kouha bites it back. Narrowly. "And if you injure him, I'll be mad."
Judal shrugs heavily, his feet actually bothering to touch the ground as he gives Aladdin another annoyed stare. "He grew. A little. Less easy to turn into a ball and kick around now, at any rate."

This is probably the first time Aladdin’s been afraid since he’s been captured.

By himself, alone, even without his friends with him, he’s not afraid of Judal. Chained up, totally at his mercy, knowing how Judal likes to play with people….

Aladdin swallows hard, looking up at Kouha with pleading in his eyes. They’re friends, aren’t they? At least Kouha’s always been nice to him, even if he did conquer Magnoshuttat, but that’s a country thing, that’s politics, and when he’d agreed to become a prisoner….

That’s right. He’d agreed. He’d given his word, knowing that he’d be a slave. Aladdin bites his lip and swallows hard, shooting Kouha a last, nervous look before letting himself be steered. “What do you want to do with me?” he asks, and hopes his voice isn’t quavering. The memory of Ugo, pierced by giant shards of ice, brought low and in awful pain as Judal laughed, is enough to make him a little sick at the thought of going wherever Judal wants.

"I said I'm bored."

It's with an easy shove that Aladdin's tossed into Judal's chambers, the door shutting behind him. "Eat with me, and maybe I won't use you for target practice or something. My pet's busy being punished at the moment."

Aladdin’s eyes widen at the sight of food, and his mouth waters as he nods enthusiastically. “Okay!” The promise of food is a strong lure right now with how he’s been fed in the dungeons, and he sits immediately, blinking up at Judal. “What kind of pet do you have? Is it a cat? Or a lizard?”

Judal snorts, dragging Aladdin over and shoving him down at the already set table. "No, dumbass. Sinbad's my pet. And he looks a lot better in chains than you do," he adds with a mutter, flopping down on the opposite side and grabbing for a peach. "Kinda bummer you grew at all. Definitely would be easier to toss around if you were still… bitty."

Aladdin makes a face. “Or we could play a game or something,” he suggests, then stuffs his face with the closest thing that looks remotely edible, followed by several of its friends. “Hey, where did you learn all the spell names and stuff? Mogamett said you never studied with him but you use a lot
Judal was hoping the brat would be a little more... intimidated.

Instead he's eating like nothing ever happened between them, and Judal scowls, taking a hard bite out of his peach. "I had way better teachers than you, in Al-Sarmen. Your magic school is--was a joke. Burnt to the ground now, if I've heard right."

"Yeah..." A cloud passes in front of his vision. "I had some good times at school there, but there were a lot of things wrong with the way Magnoshuttat ran, too. I'm a little surprised Kou burned it down, I thought you guys were working together."

"I don't know about all of that stuff. I'm guessing they were trying to do their own thing and pull away from Al-Sarmen, but I don't care either way." A pause, and Judal slowly sucks the juice out of a section of his peach. "So. That trick you do with Solomon's seal. You're gonna tell me how."

Aladdin blinks. "Sure. I mean, I'll try, but I'm really not sure how it wokrs myself. It's not really a trick, it just...it feels like something’s moving through me more like I’m doing anything." He picks up a peach, bites it, and his eyes go wide. "Wow, these are way better than any I’ve had before!"

"Yeah, peaches are a thing here." Judal frowns, eyeing him contemplatively. "If you can't teach me how, then I'll probably let Al-Sarmen seal your magic," he says with a dismissive shrug. "I mean, really, what good are you otherwise? You just keep messing up our plans."

Aladdin shrugs. "Like I said, I'll try. Have you ever had your magic sealed? Does it hurt?"

That's supposed to garner more of a reaction. "... Are you fucking alive in there?" Judal irritably replies, reaching over to flick Aladdin's forehead. "No, I've never had my magic sealed. Unlike you, I'm a proper Magi, and I don't let shit like that happen to me."

Aladdin takes another bite of his peach, letting the seal of Solomon flare on his forehead, and says cheerfully, "Maybe I won't let it happen to me either."

Judal's eyes narrow. "Give it a shot, shorty. Are you so dumb you haven't noticed how heavily warded this room is? No one throws magic around in here but me, and even if you could, I can seal you in a heartbeat, besides." Okay, he doesn't quite know that part, but... "Lot of use you'd be to
your friends then. Do you know," he idly adds, flicking the pit of his peach across the room, "how much fun Gyokuen's gonna have with that pretty one?"

Aladdin winces at that, thinking of how miserable Titus had sounded, shivering in the jail cell. “She’s going to have to do it fast,” he says quietly. “He’s not going to last much longer, here or anywhere.” The peach doesn’t taste quite as good now, and he sets it down, curling his knees up to his chest.

"Oh, he'll last just fine, once she's got his rukh all turned to black." He flops backward, sprawling over the floor. "And if he doesn't, then he'll be my black djinn. She promised me him, after Sinbad started being a little bitch."

“I don’t know if you’re going to like him,” Aladdin says, looking out the window over the tops of his knees. “He’s….” He shakes his head, tucking his face into his knees and hugging them close. “He’s a nice guy. And he’s really sad and angry a lot. And he’s not a girl even though he looks like one.”

"Doesn't matter what they're like once they're a black djinn," Judal snorts. "'Sad' and 'angry' just makes them more powerful. Sounds good to me."

“Do you care what they were like before they were djinns?” Aladdin asks. “Do you have any friends, Judal? Do you think they’d make good djinns?”

"No, I don't care, and sure, I've got friends." More like people that listen to you when you threaten them--well, Kougyouku doesn't quite fall under that category, but… "What's with the twenty questions? I bet," he sighs, shoving himself upright again, "you'd be a nice one, too. Not sure how to get you there, though. Your rukh's way too white right now, sort of stupid to look at."

“Just making conversation.” Aladdin picks up the peach again, nibbling on the skin, then sucking out the pulp. “You said you wanted to eat and talk, right? Or did you just want to eat quietly?”

"… Aren't you afraid of me?” It's hard not to be annoyed by this one. "You should be. I was going to sink all of Sindria, you know, if Freckles hadn't gone ahead and tossed Sinbad at our feet."

Aladdin shrugs. “I’m not an island. Is Ja’far here, by the way?”
"You're easier to sink than an island," Judal petulantly snaps back. "And yeah, he is. What do you care, that slut of a snake hasn't even asked about you once."

“I’d still want to see him. And you, I’ve been thinking about you.” Aladdin rolls onto his belly, propping his chin up on his hands. “Have you been thinking about what I showed you?”

"Good luck, he's busy sucking Kouen's cock. Or anyone's cock he can find now that Kouen's in the dungeon." Judal growls underneath his breath, irritation sharply rising. "And no, I haven't been thinking about that. Why the fuck did you ever even show me that?"

“Your mom was really pretty, I saw her too, you know.” Aladdin rolls over onto his back, plucking another piece of fruit from the tray and popping it into his mouth. “Do you think she'd have been a good black djinn?"

The room's temperature drops a solid dozen degrees. "Why the hell do you care, anyway?" is Judal's low response. "Why have you been thinking about me when I tried to kill you?"

“I always think about the people who try to kill me,” Aladdin says, fingers tracing little patterns on the carpet. “I always wonder why they tried to do it and if they’d try to do it again if they knew me.”

"You're not even supposed to exist." It comes out sharp, barely more than a growl in the back of his throat. "You could die, and that would set everything straight, so damn right I'd enjoy killing you. The hell is so special about you, anyway, that you have Solomon breathing down your throat, that Sinbad wants you to be his?"

Aladdin pops a grape into his mouth. “I thought you said if we eat you wouldn’t want to kick me around? Besides, I thought that the whole thing with your black rukh was that you don’t like the way things are and you’re trying to change it.” He leans forward, blinking. “What are you trying to change your fate to, anyway?"

"You ask a lot of annoying questions."

Judal nearly throws a peach into his face—but no, that's a waste of a goddamn good peach, and reserved for people he likes, anyway. He bites into it instead, seething. "Yet you never answer any of mine. Seriously, what the fuck did you do to make Sinbad like you so much?"
Aladdin tilts his head, curious. “Like me so much? Sinbad’s just a friend of mine. I have a lot of friends. I think he likes you a lot too.”

Judson's jaw tightens. "Yeah? Then tell me why he wants you as his Magi, and not me."

Aladdin shrugs. “I don’t know anything about that. He asked me to be the Magi of Sindria, but I’m not. I’m not anyone’s, until Alibaba gets a kingdom. I promised him, even if he doesn’t remember.”

A blank stare follows those words. "… Wait. You've already chosen a king?" Judal's head cocks. "Alibaba… that's that little blond shit from Balbadd, isn't it?"

“I think he’s going to be a great king someday,” Aladdin says, a smile on his face now. “He’s really smart and brave and kind, when he remembers to think about other people and not just himself. And he beat your black djinn.”

Judson's eyes narrow. "Only because of Solomon," he irritably replies. "Because I passed out. And because it was his fucking boyfriend or something, I don't know. Any normal circumstances and it wouldn't have happened. Don't give him too much credit, he’s giving his country away."

“He’s doing what he thinks is right. I think it’s very brave of Alibaba to give up his country for what he believes is best for his people. He gave away all his wealth from Amon’s dungeon to free slaves, too,” he points out. “I think he’s a very noble king, with or without a country!”

"He's done it more than once?" Judal incredulously retorts. "Wow, you sure know how to pick 'em."

“I think it’s better to want people to be happy than to want people to be your subjects.” Aladdin shrugs. “He’s a very good person, and he wants everyone to be free to make their own lives.”

"You're an idiot. Even I know that's not how people are. People want a king, they want to be ruled, they want someone strong telling them what to do," Judal says, eyes lidding. "And you've chosen the worst possible 'king' to go up against mine. It's going to be fun, watching yours be roasted alive. Kougyoku says he can't even djinn equip yet."

“He’ll get there,” Aladdin says confidently. “Alibaba is going to be a great king. And I don’t think Sinbad would really want to fight him, they’re friends too. Or do you mean another king of yours?”
A sneer follows that. "Did you not catch the part when I said Sinbad doesn't want me? His loss. I guess I'll just have to go with Kouen instead; he's just as strong, if not stronger."

“Okay,” Aladdin agrees, stretching out and grabbing a bread roll off the table. “You’re really fond of Kouen, right? Why do you let him stay in the basement, then?”

"Because it's safer there, right now," Judal crossly mutters. "It's not like he's getting hurt down there. Better there, than having to step between him and that witch." Not that Kouen would ever see it that way, or appreciate it for a moment.

“The dungeons aren’t really so bad,” Aladdin agrees. “Not…” He curls up again, remembering some of the things he’d heard down there. “Not when the guards don’t hurt you. Sometimes they hurt people down there, I hate the sound of it.”

"Oh," the older Magi sighs out, "that was probably Sinbad. I sent him down there to be punished, you know. I hope they're doing a good job of it, he deserved it."

“Not just him. The guards….the ones who….” Aladdin puts the roll back on the table, curling his knees up again. “There were a lot of them. When there were too many they’d come hurt the other prisoners even though they weren’t supposed to, that’s why I gave myself up.”

"Welcome to war. Don't look so upset, this is what you signed up for by being that stupid." Judal's head tilts, a smirk on his lips. "Did you really think the Kou Empire would keep all of its promises? Don't whine to Kouha about it, he can't do a damned thing, not while Gyokuen's still in charge. A Magi should have more pride than that, anyway."

“I don’t know a lot about what a Magi’s supposed to do,” Aladdin admits. “You’re the only one I know. I met Scheherazade once, a little, but she was really….um, she reminded me more of a king than a magician, really. A good king, though,” he adds, remembering. “And a really pretty one.”

"Raise dungeons and blow shit up, for starters--ahh, but you can't do any of that, and you won't ever be able to now, because you're just gonna be someone's pet the rest of your life. Even if I don't do it first," Judal drawls, leaning over the table, "you're gonna get picked up by Al-Sarmen at some point here. They'll poke and prod at you to try and find out what makes you tick, maybe even try and turn your rukh black. Even if they can't, that's fine. You're an anomaly, remember? They won't just seal your magic, they'll take it away. I've seen them do it. That's what you signed up for."
Aladdin raises his face, meeting Judal’s eyes. “Does it make you happy to see other people in pain?” he asks, blue eyes wide. “Has it always?”

"Does it make you feel better, thinking that it hasn’t?" Judal breathes, eyebrows arching. "I don't like you. You've never done anything but fuck things up for me. It's about time that something bad happens to you."

“I don’t think anything is going to make me feel better about the way you are,” Aladdin says frankly. “And it doesn’t have anything to do with having black rukh. What bad things keep happening to you that you think they need to happen to someone else for a change?”

Yeah, he's fucking done with this one. What was he even thinking, imagining this to be satisfying in some way? Even if he isn't bored, he's frustrated. "If you ask me one more stupid question, I'll slit your throat and leave you to bleed out for the maids to clean up," Judal mutters, shoving himself to his feet. "You don't care, anyway. Stop acting like you're so perfect."

“I don’t think I’m perfect.” Aladdin picks out another peach and stops, sniffing it. “Oh, this is what Kougyoku smelled like, isn’t it? I thought it was peaches, but it wasn’t quite the same back in Sindria. Do you like these too?”

"Don't just--ugh, don't sniff it, at least eat it if you're gonna touch them." Right. He's done with this one. Wait, though--"The hell were you doing smelling Kougyoku?"

“She smells good! She’s a really pretty lady,” Aladdin says, remembering with a smile. “Her boobs aren’t that big, but that’s okay. I was pretty good, but she let me sit on her lap sometimes anyway. Is she here too?”

Judal doesn't quite remember freezing Aladdin to the nearest wall, but it happens all the same. Sucking in a deep breath, he strides right past the other Magi on his way to the door. "You," he calmly says, "can stay there. Hope you enjoyed the meal, might be your last at this rate."

Turns out, Gyokuen is still a creepy bitch.

Whining to her about releasing Kouen already yields no result. Instead, she purrs something about him being such a good boy in his ear, and here, drink this, it'll make you even prettier--
Yeah, no. Judal remembers the last time he drank something from her hand. Or rather, he remembers drinking it, and not much else.

He's not quiet when he returns to his chambers, slamming the door behind him and flopping down into bed in short order. Not worth sparing a glance to the baby Magi frozen on his wall—he knows Aladdin is still there, doesn't care—because more important is sleep, and burying himself into enough blankets to forget that he's so stupidly alone in this palace right now…

*Kouen will be out--eventually.* Sinbad, too, even if he's mad at him. Little he can do but forgive both of them, even if they ignore him and don't care, he thinks, forcing himself to sleep with a long, weary sigh.

The ice is really, really slow to fade, and Aladdin’s teeth are chattering horribly by the time he finally gets himself unstuck. It would have taken seconds if he had his magic, but that’s locked up as securely as he is, so he just waits for it to melt on its own. It’s got to be magic ice, got to be, and his limbs are achy and awful by the time he finally gets off the wall.

He’s going to go back to the dungeons, quietly locking himself back in with Titus and Sphintus, but something makes him pause.

Judal is making weird noises in his sleep, lonely, whuffling little noises that make Aladdin’s heart hurt just to hear them. He’ll probably be upset, probably freeze Aladdin to the wall again, but, well, there’s little better he can hope for in this palace.

Aladdin rubs his arms quickly to try and warm them up, then carefully crawls onto the bed, curling up behind Judal and gently petting his hair.

It's reflex, far more than any realization of who Aladdin is, that brings Judal to shift in his sleep, turning over with a sniff and huff of breath to bury his face into the other Magi's side. Another wet sniff, and an arm flops over Aladdin in kind. "Stupid king," is his mumble, complete with a *squeeze* meant to draw his 'prisoner' closer.

Aladdin doesn’t say anything, afraid his words will break the mood, but he wraps his arms around Judal, hands petting his hair again. It’s kind of weird, to have Judal curling up against him like a big kitty, but there are a lot worse and weirder things in the world, and at least this reminds him that Judal is still a *person.*
Another, wetter sniffle, and Judal curls himself closer, butting his face into Aladdin. "Really… really stupid…" is the wholly sleepy mumble, complete with a little hiccup of breath. It's suddenly not just his voice that's watery, but the press of his face into Aladdin's side as well, and Judal's brow furrows deeply as he sleeps, shivering.

It's kind of hard to tell if Judal is even awake, but Aladdin cuddles him anyway, finally getting some sleep of his own as the warmth of Judal’s body thaws him out. Even in sleep, his hands stroke through that soft thick hair. Judal smells good, better than anything he’s smelled in a while, and it’s easier than it should be to curl up with him. “Sweet dreams, Judal,” he whispers, closing his eyes.

Judal supposes he's woken up in stranger ways and stranger places, though this kind of takes the cake for now.

It's dark when his eyes slit open again, eyelashes trying to stick to his skin, and so he irritably rubs his face into the nearest warm body--ah. Wait. Who is it, exactly?

Not Sinbad.

No, still definitely not Sinbad.

It's that other Magi, and that makes his stomach twist, irritation fluttering through him when he lifts a hand to scrub at his eyes. His face hurts, the way it does after he's cried for a long time, and that's just stupid. All of this is stupid, down to the way the kid is curled up around him, and Judal wonders if he must have had what Gyokuen was trying to make him drink after all.

What does it say about him, though, that he doesn't really want to get up?

Aladdin wakes slowly now that he’s warm, instinctively burrowing into the sweet-spicy-smell of the warm body next to him. He knows, really, who he’s cuddling up to, but as long as Judal doesn’t mind, Aladdin’s inclined to hang onto that comfort for as long as possible.

Ugh.

Judal thinks about moving again. He really does, because this is just weird, and weirder still is even if
his face hurts, he actually feels rested for a change. It's probably the flutter of Aladdin's rukh about, or something weird like that, he dully thinks, watching the white spray of it littered about the room, coalesced especially around the kid's curled up body. Well, whatever. If it makes him sleep better, that's fine, he supposes…

But still--"I'm not your damned girlfriend, don't rub yourself on me," Judal crossly mutters.

Aladdin stops moving, but he doesn’t move away, letting out a breath as he tries to go as still as possible. He tries not to breathe, but that doesn’t work too well, so he starts again, hoping it’s not too annoying. “Sorry. You can put me back in the dungeon afterward, but we can sleep a little longer if you want.”

"Supposed to give you back to Kouha." Judal snorts, smushing his face down into a pillow. "You're like a furnace. And a sleeping tonic. Maybe will keep."

Aladdin smiles a little. This is the Judal he’d seen in Solomon’s wisdom, the one that had clung happily to his mother’s braid as a baby, and Aladdin nudges just slightly closer. “Kouha sleeps late. He won’t notice. Comfy.”

"i threatened to kill you not a few hours ago," is Judal's sleepy, irritable grumble. "You shouldn't be so thrilled to stay with me. It's the mattress, isn't it? Don't get used to it, mine's made special."

“Shh,” Aladdin murmurs, pulling Judal a little closer. “You smell good.”

Ah.

He's blaming still being sleepy on how his pulse flutters, just the slightest bit, and maybe the fact that he’s been without Sinbad and Kouen both for days now. At least one of them usually pays him an underhanded compliment or two… "Don't grab at me," he mutters all the same.

“Okay,” Aladdin agrees, and throws a leg over Judal’s hips anyway because he’s warmer that way, and he can feel their heartbeats going at the same rate pressed up this close. He starts drifting off again, mumbling, “Pretty hair.”

Yeah, he's basically come to the conclusion that he's desperate.
Judal huffs out a slow, annoyed breath, his eyes shutting all the same and his face burying itself firmly into a pillow, not allowing himself to use Aladdin's neck or hair or anything like that. "Whatever," he mumbles. "Just don't move around a lot."

Judal’s resolution is silly, and as soon as he falls asleep again Aladdin burrows closer, keeping the chill of Kou off them both by wriggling around until they’re pretty thoroughly entangled. Like this, face against Judal’s (sadly flat) chest, he can finally sleep happily.

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Magicians, so long as they are caught unawares, are an entirely too-easy kill.

Gyokuen suspects nothing from him. It's a bonus that she turns him so much a blind eye, thinking him amusing at best, a predictable traitor of a snake that she can use as easily as she does the rest of Al-Sarmen's forces. Ja'far doesn't care what she thinks of him so long as he can use it to his advantage, and in this situation, he certainly can.

The only problem is she's never *alone*.

He's taking a dozen and a half risks. Troublesome, all of this, and Ja'far can't help but bitterly hope that Sinbad has indeed already planted that box within Judal's chambers to be found by the wretch in short order--because to be honest, he sort of doubts he'll make it out of this one alive. It has nothing to do with Gyokuen. It has everything to do with Al-Sarmen.

Ja'far has precautions in place, at the very least. His world is already swimming, in fact, so he has to act fast.

When he strikes, he strikes well and true, enjoying thoroughly the pool of her blood when his blade stabs through the back of her neck, clear through her spine and internally decapitating her as she slumps over the dinner table. He *doesn't* enjoy being hauled from the shadows in short order, the agonizing pinprick of a dozen spells hitting him at once bringing him to his knees, heavy and thrumming with black rukh.

It's a good thing, when his world goes black.
Judal sleeps through dinner.

He can't remember the last time he's slept so much, actually. All he knows is his room is so pleasantly warm, that his bed has never felt quite so comfortable, and when he does wake, the little flutter of white birds is odd but nice, even when they turn to black at a moment's brush against his skin. All of it would be perfect, except--

*Hot, hard lines of muscle, strong hands, long fingers, sharp teeth and a twisting, rough pull on his braid that makes his back arch--*

He's soaked with sweat, and between his legs--

Judal *wants* to blame the brat still cuddled up next to him—not only curled up close, but hard, pressed into the small of his back—but his mouth opens and shuts, cheeks flushing hot as he abruptly sits up. He hasn't remembered his *dreams* in forever, let alone dreams like *that*, and he certainly hasn't… found pleasure like that in them in a very, very long time. He needs to bathe, wants that stickiness *off*, a source of desperate humiliation that he'd rather forget (he's a *Magi*, why doesn't anyone want to *keep him*?).

Aladdin comes all the way awake once Judal starts stirring, *really* stirring, not just making fun, pretty little noises in his sleep that make Aladdin’s skin tight, his breath quick, and he arches, sighing a breath out through his nose. “Mmm….if you hold still for a few more minutes, I’ll be done too,” he murmurs, curling an arm around Judal’s abdomen as he undulates his body in slow, easy, lazy rolls against the older boy’s back.

He's desperate, but he's not *that* desperate.

The kid's what, 12? On top of that, Judal *hates him*. At least, he's pretty sure he remembers a good number of reasons to hate him, and this isn't helping. "Fucking quit it,” Judal lowly growls, though it's a *little* difficult to pull away when his own body twitches at the press of Aladdin’s cock against him. Kouen's right, he really is a slut. "This is your fault."

“Okay,” Aladdin agrees, and rubs his face in between Judal’s shoulderblades, “You smell really nice. Like a pretty lady, one of the really expensive ones.” Judal said to *stop*, but he’s not *leaving*, and Aladdin’s not *really* doing anything, just moving around a little...maybe he won’t be *too* mad,
and Aladdin’s already so hard it’s pretty uncomfortable to stay like that. It’s got to be all that time in the dungeons, with no lovely women in sight, and no chance even for time to himself. He rolls his hips, shivering a little at the slow, wet drag of his cock up the small of Judal’s back. “You made really nice noises, too.”

"How long were you listening?" Ugh. That makes him even more angry, more so embarrassed, and Judal wonders what's more of a blow to his dignity now--letting this bitty excuse of a Magi rut against his back and compliment him, or leave him there to rub one off in his bed while he drowns himself in a bath. "Just--ugh, just… finish already," he mutters, burying his face down into a pillow as he tries not to shiver himself.

That makes Aladdin beam with pleasure at getting permission, and he speeds up a little, the lazy rolls of his hips getting more frequent as his breath gets soft and intent, eager little pants against Judal’s neck as he thrusts. Judal is so pretty, his skin so soft and everything about him all firm, no breasts unfortunately but his ass is almost as nice as Titus’s, and he worms his way down, going from thrusting against the small of Judal’s back to rutting against the curve of his ass, eager, delighted little huffs coming out of his mouth. “Almost done,” he assures the older boy, and on a whim, presses an open-mouthed kiss to Judal’s upper back.

This shouldn't be something he enjoys.

It should annoy him at best, but instead his face is hot, his skin prickling and twitching with every slide of Aladdin's cock against him, every huff of the kid's breath against his back. Judal swallows, biting down into a pillow lest he start giving Aladdin ideas, and oh, he's got a few of them, none of which will do anything to get rid of the odd twist of heat in the pit of his belly.

*It's just because you had a stupid dream. That's all, you're still wound up--*

Yeah, he'll go with that. Or he would, if--okay, there was no way Aladdin had that much muscle tone the last time Judal punched him in the face.

Aladdin’s arm tightens around Judal’s waist, dropping down low on his abdomen as he squirms around, tugging his hips back to give him a little extra pressure. It’s really nice like this, nice enough that he wishes he could stay, and he can’t help but think of how nice it would be to slide between the cheeks of Judal’s ass instead.

That thought alone pushes him happily over the edge, and his hips jerk a few times, spilling messy and hot over Judal’s ass and lower back before he stills. “Thanks,” he whispers, nuzzling into Judal’s back. “You’re really really nice to do that with.”
New low established, Judal thinks, grinding his teeth as he tries to will his own cock not to get started again. Easier said than done, when he's sticky and shivery and Aladdin is still breathing hot against his neck and back and ugh--"Don't touch me again," he mutters, the words coming out a little too breathless for his liking, and so he accompanies them with a shove, carefully attempting to slide away. "Just--why haven't I thrown you back into the dungeons yet?"

“I don’t know,” Aladdin says, letting Judal go regretfully, then noticing the mess and grabbing a handkerchief from the bedside, wiping it carefully off.

Judal's teeth grind harder. "What even gives you the right to touch me? You're just a little brat. I'm going to enjoy when Al-Sarmen gets their hands on you, and picks you apart, piece by piece." He yanks on the tie to his braid. "Get out, I need to go scrub you off of me."

Aladdin sighs, tossing the cloth to the floor. So much for being nice, then. He wriggles his pants back up, then stretches out, hopping down to the floor. “Thank you anyway. I’m sorry you didn’t have fun.”

"The hell would you know about fun?" Judal mutters angrily, a flurry of magic unwinding his hair in swift order as he yanks his clothes off. "Enjoy rotting in the dungeon."

“I have a lot of fun! You’re really nice to curl up with, when you’re not yelling and saying mean things.” He pauses by the door, blinking. “Wooow, you have the prettiest hair! Can I touch it?”

Judal's head turns, a flat stare leveled upon him. "Are you serious? I just talked about how I wanted you torn to little pieces, and you're asking if you can touch my hair?"

“Well,” Aladdin asks, undeterred, “can I?”

"I--" Kouen never wants to touch his hair. Only annoying people do. Sinbad only does occasionally, and he doesn't really compliment it anymore. Not that he cares about Sinbad, he can rot in the dungeons, too. "... I don't let just anyone touch my hair."

“Does it get tangled easy? Ohh, it looks really soft!” Aladdin is almost bouncing on the balls of his feet now, barely restraining his fingers when they seem to drift up on their own accord. “Can I? I won’t pull it or anything!”
Judal opens his mouth, then shuts it again. Okay. He can find logic in this, too. The kid did just make a mess out of him, it's only right if he helps clean up. That's what a slave does, after all. "… You can help me wash it. You're the one that made everything a mess, anyway."

Aladdin beams, following Judal to the bathing area and working the soap carefully through the long strands, marveling at the soft thickness of it and the way it spreads out through the water. "There's so much of it," he breathes, working in a lather all the way up to Judal's scalp, massaging it in gently. "Does it get heavy? Is that why you wear the gold thing on your neck, to keep your head up right?"

Judal thinks, maybe, he can tolerate this one and keep him around for at least his skill with hair. He's a dozen times better than any servant or slave Kouen's ever gifted him--they don't even know where to start, and it's just easier doing it all himself usually, besides. This, though… this feels good, and Judal's content to let himself relax a little, his eyes lidding. "It's magicked, stupid," he mutters. "I've never cut my hair, if I could feel the actual weight of it, I'd probably never get out of bed."

"Wow, that makes sense. Mine’s too thin to have to worry about that, but with this much, yeah, I can see that." He strokes his hands absently through the long strands, watching them pool and spread in the water. "Looks like a mermaid, when you're like this. Here, lay back? I want to wash the rest of it without splashing your face."

There's but a moment's hesitation before Judal does so, sinking down with a shuddery little sigh. "You're good at this," he murmurs. "You don't have hair like mine at all, so how'd that happen?"

"I like touching people. In Magnoshuttat, we all used to take baths together in these big pools, like they have in Laem, all heated by magic." Aladdin remembers the bathhouses fondly, massaging Judal's scalp. "I've never seen hair like yours before, it's really beautiful."

"Yeah, I gathered you… definitely like touching people," Judal huffs out, surrendering with a last, twitch and shiver before sinking down entirely, his eyes shutting. "You know, it doesn't matter how much you compliment me. I still hate you."

Aladdin nods, working in silence for a few minutes, undoing every tiny snarl, making sure it's all laying right as he cleans it, a little excited about putting it all up again. "Why do you hate me?"

"Because you shouldn't even exist." When says it out loud like that, it sounds a little less than convincing.
Aladdin works quietly, nodding. “Do you know why I do? I don’t. I woke up in the lonely room. I don’t know how I got there.”

Judal snorts at that. "You're the one that's had a conversation with Solomon. Why didn't you ask him?"

“I don’t know, he seemed busy. Besides….” Aladdin shrugs, starting to card Judal’s hair into a few different sections. “You saw what he showed you. Do you want to talk to him again? It’s like riding a tornado.”

"He's dead, how busy could he be?" Judal's teeth grit, his throat tightening as his memories dare to flash before his eyes again. "No. No, I don't want to fucking talk to him. You keep him to yourself, I don't care about any of that stuff, anyway."

“I wish I could see what my mother looked like. If I had one.” Aladdin lifts a section of hair, gently squeezing out some of the water, making sure it’s thoroughly rinsed. “Why do there only have to be three of us?"

"I dunno, that's just what they've always said," Judal sighs out, his eyes cracking open. "So you're the anomaly, obviously. Yunan's older than dirt, Scheherazade's been around for a couple hundred at least. And well, I'm older than you, so…"

“Yeah, I guess so. Hey, how many dungeons have you raised? You’ve got a lot of candidates, right?”

"Mmmhm. I lost count of how many, I've raised a bunch." Judal arches an eyebrow. "You haven't done any, have you? Kinda useless."

“But dungeons kill people. And I already chose my king, so what’s the point?” Aladdin asks practically.

"Dungeons kill worthless people," Judal lightly corrects. "And don't you want to, I dunno, boost his armies or something useful like that? I mean, not that you’ll ever get a chance now or anything…"
“Well, he doesn’t have an army or a country right now, so that wouldn’t really do much good,” Aladdin points out. “I don’t know, if he asked me to I might, but…” He shrugs. “Have you ever been through a dungeon? They’re really scary.”

Judson blinks at him, openly confused. “… Why were you in a dungeon? That’s cheating.”

Aladdin’s head tilts. “Is it? I’ve been in two. Why’s that cheating?”

“… Because it is.” Judal twists around, water sloshing in the process. “Hey, does that mean your king has two djinn now? I only sensed one that time before. I didn’t think he had enough magoi for that.”

“No, Hakuryuu got the next one. Hey, I haven’t seen him around, is he here?” Aladdin asks, suddenly remembering. “Is he doing okay with his arm and everything?”

“Ahh, that little shit. Al-Sarmen likes hiium,” Judal sighs out, stretching his arms out with his fingers wriggling. "Kouen tried to send him away, didn't work. He's still here, wanting a piece of the empire. I think it's funny that he wants to try, so I offered him some help… he hasn't quite taken it yet, though. Crazy idiot.”

“Really? What kind of help?” Aladdin squirms around a little, then kind of urges Judal forward, straddling his hips to get better access to his scalp. “He’s a really nice guy sometimes. Hey, why do people get married? No one ever wants to talk about it to me.”

"To make him stronger, of course. He hates his mother, so…” Judal frowns, shifting uncomfortably underneath Aladdin's weight before deciding to just not move. It's safer that way. "And I dunno. Politics, usually. Sometimes babies. Even more rarely if they give a shit about one another.”

“Ah, that’s okay then. I wonder why no one wanted to tell me?” Aladdin shrugs that off, settling comfortably onto the small of Judal’s back. “Ooh, your butt is nice and curvy like this. Do you like Hakuryuu?”

"I'm going to throw you across the room if you make one more comment," is his low growl to follow. "And I guess I like him well enough, whatever.”

Okay, that’s definitely not something Judal likes talking about, which is kind of weird given that he
likes compliments to his hair, but that’s fine, just another version of the “appropriate conversations” lecture that Sphintus had given him. Best to stick to that list, then. “I bet Al-Sarmen taught you a lot more stuff than I learned at school. Do you think you’re the most powerful Magi?”

"Mmm, well, I’m definitely stronger than you," Judal sighs out, his eyes lidding in thought. "But I’m not that dumb. Everyone knows it's Yunan… except you, apparently, but I think you've been living under a rock."

“Oh, he’s the really old one? I haven’t met him.” Aladdin wrings out a few more drops from one strand of Judal’s hair, and searches around until he finds a wide-toothed comb, working in tiny sections to keep from pulling. “Scheherazade is pretty scary, when she’s mad at you. Does Yunan have a king?”

Judal snorts, and does a good job of not making noises when his hair is brushed. "Nope, no king. He lives in a hole or something, last I checked. What a weirdo. You'd probably get along."

“Hmm, I didn’t like living in the solid room, though,” Aladdin muses. “It was really lonely. I like living out here a lot more, even if I get hurt and sad out here sometimes too.” He works the comb up one section, letting the teeth scrape gently against Judal’s scalp. “How old is old?”

A flutter of his eyes, and Judal makes an effort to bite the inside of his cheek, sighing out through his nose. "Mmm… hundreds of years, I dunno, really. Old as dirt. Dirt's old."

“Is it?” Aladdin’s never really thought about the age of dirt before, but it’s probably been around for a while. He works the comb, then switches to another section of hair, draping the first one over Judal’s shoulder. “Hold that while I comb this one out? I don’t want any of it to get tangled.”

Ah, right. Coordination. What's that again? Judal shivers slowly, but does as he's directed, reaching a hand up to grab at his own hair. "Yeah, dirt's really cold. I hear he doesn't look it, though."

The middle section combs out a lot easier, and Aladdin’s raking the comb against Judal’s scalp in no time. “Mmm, your hair is so thick, but everyone else I know with hair like this has split ends and stuff. Yours is perfect all the way down.” He strokes a hand down from scalp to where it’s appropriate to stop, then starts on the third section.

"Spend a lot of time taking care of it," Judal sighs, giving an absent shrug. "And magic. Magic's useful for keeping it nice. Otherwise it'd be kind of impossible, it's already stupidly heavy…"
“*Really* fun to brush, though,” Aladdin says happily. “Everyone must fight over playing with it, huh?” He frowns at his own. “Mine is really tiny and thin, I don’t mind it, but Kouha likes to put it in twenty or thirty braids and they wind up *REALLY* small.”

"I don't let anyone touch it, they don't brush it right," he mutters, and Judal wrinkles his nose at the thought of Kouha in particular messing with his hair. "He's awful. I let him do that *once*, when we were a lot younger. Never again."

“He doesn’t really let me say no,” Aladdin grumbles. “It looks kinda stupid. Hey, why does the Kou dungeon have separate dungeons for boys and girls? I miss girls.”

"Because small courtesies? Geez, you're dumb sometimes. Get used to missing girls, unless Kouha lets you touch some of his--ahh, but I'm taking you from him," Judal decides with a sigh. "Need someone who can do my hair like this more often."

At that, Aladdin perks up. “You’ll let me play with your hair again?” he asks eagerly, and starts working his way farther up the third section. “Your hair is really pretty. Sometimes your jewelry gets in the way, though. Is that heavy too? Is it real gold?”

"It's not *letting* you, it's ordering you--you're a slave, after all," Judal sniffs. "And if it gets in the way, I'll just take it off, you know. Of course it's real gold, I wouldn't wear anything less. It's magicked, too, though, so it's not heavy."

“Oh, you can take it off? I thought it might be magic too. There’s a lot of magic around you, you know.” He brushes over the scalp, going over it a few times for the way Judal shivers, even if he probably doesn’t know he’s doing it. “I trained with some mages who use your kind of magic. It’s really hard to fight.”

"Ahh… yeah, good." *Distracting.* When's the last time anyone gave his hair this kind of attention? It feels a little too good. "And I've gotten stronger, so if we fought again, I'd definitely win."

Aladdin nods slowly, brow furrowing as he arranges all three strands to start braiding. “Probably,” he admits. “I've been training hard, but not against any other magi or anything. And I don’t….” He worries at his lower lip. “You have a lot more practice trying to kill people.”

"Well, yeah, that's what you do when you fight," Judal mumbles, his eyes lidding and head bowing
forward slightly. "I've never fought other Magi other than you either, but I know I'd win. I'm stronger than you, and you're too nice."

“Well, if we fight and you kill me, I can’t play with your hair anymore,” Aladdin reasons practically, starting to layer one strand over the other. “I mean, I’d miss a lot more stuff, like talking to my friends and going on adventures and sex, but you’d miss this, right?”

"… I could deal without." A little irritated twitch slides down his spine. "Just because I like it now doesn’t mean I'm always gonna like it. And I already told you, you can say good-bye to that sort of stuff, anyway. You're someone's property now."

Aladdin shrugs. Things change pretty fast, lately, and it’s not the first time he’s been made a slave. “Nothing’s forever. We’re gonna do fun things together, right? What do you like to do for fun?”

"I don't have time for stuff like that." Roll around with Sinbad. Get petted. Eat. Flop on Kouen's desk. Ah, when he puts it like that, his life is kind of boring.

Aladdin sighs. “That doesn’t sound like as much fun as I thought. You always seem to be having such a good time, I thought it’d be more fun to be with you.”

"If I had Sinbad as a pet all the time…” Not really true, when he’s had him for weeks and all Sinbad seems to do is make him more jealous or upset over time. "Whatever, learn to live with it. Are you done yet, I'm getting sick of my hair being all wet and stuff."

“Almost done. Oh, where’s your hairtie?” Aladdin sits back, eyes wide and appreciative. “It looks nice today! But I’m not sure it'll be dry soon, it’s still so thick.” He spots the hairtie, and fastens it securely around the end, leaving just enough free that it doesn’t undo. “I can use some heat magic on you, if you want?"

"Yeah, you try that and watch it blow up in your face. It's fine, I can do all of that myself,” Judal says with a roll of his eyes, straightening and reaching back to grab at his braid and inspect it. Aladdin did do a good job, at least. "I guess I'll keep you for this, even if you're annoying."

“Thanks!” Aladdin tries to keep positive, no matter the awkwardly mean words. His opinion on whether Judal is a bad guy or just a confused one keep changing by the minute, and he’s not exactly sure which one is true right now. “Do you still want me to sleep in the dungeons?”
Judal's expression twist a little at that as he climbs up, grabbing for the nearest long, oversized robe to wrap himself up in and wishing it was something of Kouen's or Sinbad's even as he huddles down into it. "No, I guess not. I don't want you to be all disgusting and dirty if you're going to be touching my hair."

Aladdin spares a thought for the friends he'll leave behind in the dungeons, and how they're probably going to miss him a lot, and be sadder without him there to keep the mood light. "On the floor? Hey, that's pretty!" Aladdin tugs on the end, then grabs the sash and wraps it a few times around Judal's waist. "You sure have a lot of fancy things."

"... You really don't know about personal space, do you?" Judal mutters, smacking Aladdin's hands away with an irritated huff. "On the floor, on whatever else, I don't care. Just don't get in my bed, not after how you woke me up."

“Sorry,” Aladdin says with a shrug that says he’s not sorry at all, sitting on the floor and rocking back onto his hands. “I didn’t mean to, I just woke up and you were making fun noises.”

"Which was also your fault! If you hadn't kept touching me in my sleep--" It makes him really, really angry how his skin flushes hot, and Judal snarls underneath his breath, whirling away to claw his way back into bed. "You're a horrible slave. You and Sinbad both."

Aladdin tries not to point out that Judal had started making noises long before Aladdin had given up and started rubbing against him. “I don’t mind sleeping on the floor,” he says instead. “I've slept on a lot of floors. At least this one has carpet.”

"Well, good. Keep sleeping on it, then." Judal's face finds a pillow in short order, and after a moment, he makes good use of his blankets by rolling himself up into them rather than snuggling underneath them like most people. "Now leave me alone, I'm busy being a worm."
Chapter 13

A lot of things have happened while he's been asleep.

Frankly, Judal doesn't care. It isn't his responsibility to keep the empire going. It's his responsibility to choose a king, and he never liked Gyokuen, anyway, so she was off the list no matter what Al-Sarmen said. Her death doesn't come as a surprise, and if anything, it makes things easier, less complicated.

But first, a little fun, before busting Kouen out and going about business as usual.

At least, he was supposed to have a bit of fun until Sinbad is nowhere to be found in the dungeons, and Judal wonders exactly how long he's been curled up with that other, pipsqueak of a Magi. Anger flares up within him when the guards tell him that Sinbad was escorted out hours ago, and by none other than Hakuryuu.

The little pest should have stayed up north after all, no matter how fun he was to play with.

Judal is seething by the time he lets himself into the throne room, ignoring the startled, then angered growls of generals and servants alike. If they aren't used to him doing as he pleases by now, then they've got another thing coming. "Why the hell did you let him go?" he immediately snaps, stopping at the foot of the throne that Hakuryuu seems to be perched upon. "He was mine, that wasn't your decision to make!"

Hakuryuu tries not to jump out of his skin at the interruption. Judal is an entirely different creature when he’s angry, totally removed from the playful, tricky way he acts most of the time. Dark rukh billows around him like a cloak, and Hakuryuu stands his ground--or sits it, in the throne that still feels too large for him. "If you’re referring to King Sinbad," he says in an even, measured tone that he hopes Ei is listening to, "I was righting a wrong. That was an unjust and illegal war, and I am rectifying it by releasing their head of state, no harm done."

Judal sneers back at him. "Really. Because you have every right to do that now? You aren't supposed to be sitting on that throne, you know. I don't like you enough for that."

Hakuryuu’s face turns stone and cold, and he grips his glaive with one hand, the arm of his throne with the other. "You do not choose the Emperor of Kou, Magi. You started this war on my country’s behalf, and I am finishing it."
"Ooh, we're getting all *formal* now, are we?" Judal drawls, his hands on his hips as he leans forward, eyes narrowed to slits. "And what, you think you're the emperor now? By whose decree? Just saying, I think the king of the *world* has a bit higher ranking than you, and I'm pretty sure I choose that."

"But you haven’t!"

Hakuryuu’s voice rings out sharply, and the quiet side conversations come to a halt, the room falling into a hushed silence, all eyes on the two men facing each other. "And while my family may be content for you to hold that possibility over their heads, I’m not. Go find your king somewhere else. This is Kou Empire business."

Judal leans back, and gaze twitches about the room. "Leave us."

A general snorts. "Under what authority--"

"I'll fucking use your guts in a spell. Get out."

There’s a moment’s hesitation before they all start moving, and Judal side-eyes Hakuei when she lingers, just a bit longer. *Idiots*, Judal dimly thinks, snorting as his fingers drum over his hips, his gaze flickering back to Hakuryuu in short order. "That's a rather resounding change of tune from you, crybaby. Is that how you justify taking the throne out from underneath your cousin's nose--letting him still be the king of the world?"

Hakuryuu’s knuckles are white on the throne and his staff, but he stands his ground, chin thrust out stubbornly. Damn, he does wish Ei had stayed behind, if anyone. “The throne is mine by right. My father carved this empire with his own hands. It deserves to be in the hands of his son!"

"Uh huh." Judal hops up the few short stairs of the dais, dropping himself neatly and without concern onto the arm of the throne. "The *youngest* male heir taking over--yeah, that makes sense. What, did your mommy leave a letter saying you could have it if she died? Bet you're mad about *that* being snatched out from underneath your nose. Is that why you still have Freckles locked up, but not Sinbad?"

Hakuryuu’s eye flashes, teeth gritting as he grabs Judal by the collar. “Watch the way you talk to me! I’m the Emperor, you can’t call me crybaby anymore!”
Judal blinks back at him, slow and unconcerned. "What's an emperor to a god?" he purrs, his smile not particularly kind. "Just so you know: I sucked En's dick… ah, figuratively, and literally--because I wanted to. Not because he was--is the next in line to sit his ass where you are now."

Hakuryuu’s lip curls--that is not an image he wants in his mind, especially not when En is so close to his sister. “You don’t care about Kouen,” he spits. “You never chose him. And you never will! You just like playing with people. That’s why everyone gets sick of you and leaves!”

The Magi's eyes narrow sharply at that. "You sent Sinbad away," is the immediate snarl of a retort. "He would have still been here if not for you. Whose fault is that, huh? And don't fucking tell me who I care about and who I don't. I'd drag Kouen out of that dungeon right now if I wasn't sure you'd pick a fight and fuck things up even more."

“Do you think Sinbad would have left if he really cared about you?” Hakuryuu shoots back. His blood thunders through his veins, Zagan whispering eagerly in his ear, and his muscles tense. “And all you ever did for En is get him into new wars! Everyone is better off without you!”

Rage makes him draw his wand quicker than anything, and Judal is in Hakuryuu's lap in an instant, knee shoved into his gut and the tip of his wand at the other man's throat. "You sent him away," the Magi hisses through his teeth. "He was mine, and you made him leave. I know he wouldn't have left, not on his own, not after everything.” His fingers twitch, the air a dozen degrees cooler in an instant. "En is locked in a dungeon because of your mother. I had nothing to do with that, so fucking watch your mouth."

Hakuryuu’s eye blazes, and his wooden hand shifts, fingers elongating in a flash of a second to splay out against Judal’s chest, the points digging into his ribs. “No, and you surely didn’t tell my dear departed mother that the world would be hers? Did she pet your hair and tell you you're pretty? She’s gone too! And En likes Ei ten times as much as he likes you! No one likes you best!”

"Whine more, it's cute," Judal sneers, his knuckles white around his own wand as he lurches forward, pressing into Hakuryuu's hand. "You're just mad because you didn't get to kill the witch, and that Ei doesn't like you best anymore. She was gonna make a new family with En and be perfectly content shipping you up north to forget about you. Can't say I blame her, you're an annoying little shit."

The fun thing about wood is that it's easy as hell to manipulate with a dozen other elements. Water, in particular, does some serious damage to it, and letting it seep in through the cracks, crystalize, turn to ice--all of that makes it easy enough for Judal to reach down and do it all in an instant and all the way up to Hakuryuu's shoulder to boot, shoving the hand back against the throne above Hakuryuu's
head and layering another, solid ice chunk over it to pin it in place. "I could leave you here like this, after I bust Kouen out of the dungeons," he casually says, sitting back a bit. "I dunno what he'd do to you, but I'd want to watch."

The pain of having his wooden arm wrenched and frozen is nothing compared to the anger of letting Judal play around with him again, and Hakuryuu twists, bringing his foot up hard, connecting with Judal’s chin in a swift, sharp kick. "Get off me, I’m the fucking Emperor!"

Judal's teeth slam together, and fuck, that hurts. Growling, Judal wriggles back up, dropping himself and all of his weight onto Hakuryuu's lap with a huff. "Like hell you're the emperor," he mutters, reaching up to properly realign his jaw. "Emperors know how to treat Magi. You're a little bitch, more like."

"And you’re no proper Magi!" Hakuryuu spits, bringing up his glaive to ram the wooden end into Judal's side. “You never do miracles, you just float around and make your own life easier!”

"Oww, will you fucking stop that?!" God, but Hakuryuu's gotten violent. Judal scowls, pointing his wand in the direction of the man's other hand. "I'll freeze it, too," he threatens. "And I raise dungeons all the time, don't talk to me about doing 'miracles.'"

"But that doesn’t mean anything!" Hakuryuu shouts, frustrated to the point that his voice breaks, dammit. “You--if I had half the power you do, I’d do something with it! How can you just let things happen??! You have the power of a god!"

"I know," Judal proudly returns, twirling his wand as he settles back, perching neatly atop Hakuryuu's knees. "And I do a lot of things. I'd like to do more, but there's nothing to do, really, not until I find a king I like." His head cocks. "You're so whiny. I'm pretty sure emperors aren't allowed to be whiny."

"Well, Magi aren’t supposed to be so annoying!" Hakuryuu is losing his thread, he knows it, but Judal drives him so crazy. “Probably! If you like Sinbad or En or whoever, why not just choose already? Then you can do whatever you want instead of making all these stupid wars happen!"

"It's hard to choose until they fight, though. They're actually quite similar, when it comes to strength…" Judal sighs at him, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. "You don't get it because you're a baby compared to them."
“So make them fight or anything! I’ll fight either of them if they want!” Hakuryuu says, challenge in his eyes. “I didn’t take my place on the throne to run away from fights! I’m going to stand my ground no matter what it takes, even against you!”

"… You'll die," is the blunt retort to follow. "Do you really want to die that badly?"

Hakuryuu swallows hard. “No one knows the future,” he says defensively. “I could get lucky.”

"Maybe if they lost an arm like you did, or a leg or both."

Hakuryuu’s good hand grips his staff. “Maybe I can make that happen. Don’t underestimate me!”

"Too late," Judal sighs, and he leans forward, draping one arm over the back of the throne as his forehead bumps against Hakuryuu's. "You really wanna pick a fight with the man your sister loves?" he murmurs. "Or the person Kouha idolizes? Ruining lives, just like your mother. That's really cute."

“It’s not Kouen I have a problem with,” Hakuryuu snarls, shoving forward against Judal’s forehead. “It’s that he’s being lead around by the nose by your people! And he’s dragging the Empire down with him!”

"My people?" Judal mirthfully returns, his head cocking to the side just a bit. "I think your mother, by herself, was doing a lot worse than Al-Sarmen ever directly did. With her gone, he should have an easier time of it. Well--assuming you get off your high horse and behave." His other hand idly slides up Hakuryuu's throat, thumbing his chin. "You're not good at this emperor thing. That's not what I was gonna help you with, you know."

“You weren’t gonna help me with anything.” Hakuryuu is sure of that much, and he squirms under Judal’s hand, trying to order Zagan to rip free of the ice only to get a sulky, pouty response. “You don’t like me, you're probably just going to try and kill me.”

"Wroong, stop being so whiny," the Magi sighs out, flopping forward a bit more and giving Hakuryuu's cheek a prod with one finger. "I was going to help you with your mother. Gyokuen was a creep, always has been, and if you think I liked her, you're wrong. But then that snake apparently killed her… so much for that."

Hakuryuu’s jaw clenches, and he looks down, the old anger boiling hot in his chest. “They
just….took care of it,” he mutters, furious not just with Judal, but with Ei, with Ja’far, probably Mei as well. “Like I haven’t been working towards this for months. Like I didn’t even matter.”

“Well,” Judal slowly begins, "you kinda took your sweet time. If you had just listened to me, and let me help from the beginning… maybe it wouldn't have taken months." His thumb absently slides over the dot of a mole on Hakuryuu's chin. "Shouldn't blame them for your mistakes. Your mother needed to go and they did it faster than you could."

“They sent me up North,” Hakuryuu mumbles, twisting his head to get it away from Judal’s touch, but not as viciously as before. “They sent two dozen men to escort me, it took me weeks to get away from them.”

"Because you were dumb, and being way too obvious about plotting shit--you know, like charging your mother and glaring at En every five seconds?” Geez, since when was he the voice of reason? Judal snorts, pushing Hakuryuu's head back to face him once more. "For what it's worth, I wasn't happy about that--you being sent away, I mean."

That stops Hakuryuu in his tracks, and he blinks once before flushing pink. “Don’t lie, I know you don’t like me any more than anyone else here does. I’m still going to be Emperor. I don’t care if you all hate me.”

Judal's eyes roll again, and he takes that moment to dip his head and take a bite at Hakuryuu's beauty mark in reprimand--he sort of asked for it, really. "You're a dumbass," he mutters, eyes flickering upward. "But still my king candidate, though you're not an emperor, no matter what you think. When I told you to go against your fate, this isn't what I meant."

Hakuryuu lets out a startled little squeak of a noise, furious with himself for sounding like that. “Stop it! God, you haven’t done that for years, it’s different now!”

"Why? Because it turns you on instead of makes you cry?” Same difference, really, but oh well.

“It does not!” And that’s more like a yelp than the strong, confident voice he was going for. Judal always does that kind of thing to him. “I’m not like that, I don’t want any harem boys!”

Judal pauses, sitting back with an annoyed look on his face. "Did you just compare me to a harem boy?"
Hakuryuu tries to get his hand un-stuck one more time, and gives up, huffing. “You *dress* like one. And….you *are* sitting on my lap.”

With a growl, Judal lurches forward to take another snap at that damned mole. "Because it's easier to *bite you* like this, you little shit. You should be *honored*, a god wants to chew on you a bit."

Hakuryuu’s startled snarl goes up several octaves at the end, and he thrashes, getting an elbow into Judal’s side before he’s pinned. “Stop biting my face, you freak!”

Judal huffs out a breath, and drops his wand in favor of grabbing Hakuryuu's arm, pinning it down to the arm of the throne as he *sucks* instead as per Hakuryuu's request (never mind that that is obviously not what he meant), his tongue dragging over the mark with a thoroughly entertained smirk tugging at his lips. "Very dignified," he drawls sarcastically. "Especially the part when your voice breaks like a little boy."

“I’m not--I *didn’t*--” God, he *hates* Judal. That’s easy enough to forget when the Magi acts like a human being, but when he’s *like this*, all creepy and touchy and with his mouth on my face oh god--

And he definitely doesn’t need Judal to be sitting on his lap right now.

Judal hums, his tongue dragging over the beauty mark once more before he pulls back to admire his handiwork--a hickey *there* of all places is amusing, and rather impossible to hide. He grins, tracing his thumb from that spot up to Hakuryuu's lower lip, dragging over it contemplatively as he shifts forward. "So much for not liking *harem boys,*" he snidely retorts, pressing his thumb forward a bit. "You know, if you treat certain ones right, they might be able to forgive your stupidity and help you out still."

Hakuryuu’s jaw trembles from where it’s clenched, and he *doesn’t*, he reminds himself, doesn’t like the way Judal is touching him, touching him the way no one else touches him, like he’s *interesting*, like he’s *prized*. He swallows hard, breath coming quickly, and even now, the promise of *help* is buzzing at the front of his mind. “I--don’t be dumb, you don’t want me, you just want En and Sinbad!”

"I don't want you as my king," Judal agrees openly, and he takes advantage of Hakuryuu's parted lips to press his thumb in, sliding it against his tongue. "That doesn't mean I don't *want* you. I can want a lot of things even if they aren't good for being kings."
Hakuryuu feels frozen--well, *more* frozen than his limb being literally bound by ice accounts for. His eyes dart from Judal’s hand up to his mouth, starting to say something and pausing, feeling the odd, soft skin of Judal’s thumb dragging across his tongue. That’s….different.

He squirms, telling himself he’s going to bite any second, breath coming quick and uneven through his nose as he looks up at the Magi, suddenly desperately uncertain.

Hakuryuu is really *easy*.

Annoying, yes, but easy all the same. Judal can't help but like the open, obvious uncertainty that flutters over his face--a rush of control that he seldom is granted, and it makes his own pulse jump, a little too fast and eager to be *safe*. "Just because the throne isn't yours doesn't mean other things *aren't,*" he presses, and his thumb twists against Hakuryuu’s tongue, prying his mouth open a bit more to slide another finger in there as well. "You don't want this empire, anyway, and you don't want to destroy it. You just want Al-Sarmen gone, right? With the right power, they won't be a problem for you."

On the surface, Hakuryuu understands what’s happening.

Judal is toying with him, mentally and physically, just like Judal toys with everyone. That’s easy. That’s something he can understand, can defend against.

Under the surface….

Judal is purring things he wants to hear, wants so desperately to believe are possible, and for some reason there are *fingers* in his *mouth*, and that overrides any sort of sensible reaction he has to pretty much anything, eyes wide and confused as he looks up at Judal. Slowly, trying to remember that yes, the words Judal is saying, those are words he *needs*, he nods. *Yes*, he hopes he’s saying, *yes,* I *want the power to bring them low, to kick them out of the home they tore apart.*

He knows all too well that he’s probably saying *yes* to something else, too.

"Good!"

Perhaps it's a little too *cheerful* considering the subject matter, but Judal cares little for that. He tilts his head, eyeing the ice that pins Hakuryuu's wooden arm in place. "I could unthaw that, now that
you're behaving yourself," he idly says, "but you're being kind of a stick in the mud still. Would you rather it be something else in your mouth instead?"

Hakuryuu’s eyes widen. He’s pretty sure he hasn’t agreed to anything like that. “I--” He pulls back, mouth working to try and spit Judal’s fingers out. “I’m--I’m not going to suck anything if that’s what you’re--god! That’s gross!”

"For someone that gets so hard when I'm trying to bite your beauty mark off, I'm not sure you have a lot of room to talk about gross," Judal says with a laugh, and he wriggles forward, humming as he drags a thigh up between Hakuryuu's legs to prove his point. "Ask nicely now, and I'll take the ice away. It's gotta hurt by now… ah, or is that your thing? Do you like it when it hurts?"

Hakuryuu’s eyes roll back into his head at that first, hard press of Judal’s thigh, breath quickening as he groans low in his throat. “I--no, that doesn’t make any--I just--it’s a wooden hand, idiot, of course it doesn’t feel the same way!”

"No, but you can feel it everywhere, can't you? Zagan lingers there, too, creepy earth Djinn thing that he is," Judal notes, squirming on purpose as he drags a hand up from Hakuryuu's shoulder, fingertips tiptoeing along the ice he himself laid out. "So it's not just cold here… you probably feel it everywhere. Except your cock," he idly adds, twisting his hips to let his thigh slide harder against Hakuryuu's cock again. "Would you like it more if I sucked you off?" Slowly, his lips twitch into a smirk once more. "Or is it better if your harem boy forces you to do it? Kinda scandalous."

Hakuryuu opens his mouth to say something about I thought you didn’t want to be my harem boy but what the hell can he even say to that?

(Probably not you're wrong, he does like to hang out down there.)

He looks up, hoping his stare is more challenging, less pathetic. “What would you do if I told you to get on your knees?"

"… Laugh," Judal admits with a grin, and with another touch, the ice dissolves away, water evaporating into the air in short order. "You're not good at commands like that; only Emperors are," he murmurs, licking a stripe from that mole up to Hakuryuu's lips, which are just asking to be bitten. "How about you do it instead?"

“Stupid,” Hakuryuu mumbles against Judal’s lips, breath hitching, and his legs spread a bit further
apart, letting him rub up against Judal’s leg, that warm pressure something delicious right now. “Like I know anything about doing something like that!”

That’s a better response than outright refusal. “I’ll teach you,” Judal wheedles, drawing out his next bite to Hakuryuu’s lips with a slow, eager suck of his bottom lip, breathing out a sigh against his mouth. As encouragement, he humors the way Hakuryuu arches up against him, grinding down against his cock with a rumbling purr. “You don’t even have to let me finish like that. Just wanna feel your mouth a bit.”

There’s really no bargaining with Judal.

Hakuryuu knows that. It’s impossible to bargain with someone unreasonable, and no one is less reasonable than Judal. The best he can hope for is that by going along with the Magi’s crazy plans, he’ll be more entertaining than whatever else is catching Judal’s interest at the moment.

(And he’d be lying if he said the idea of doing something so filthy, so forbidden, with someone that’s basically a god no less, wasn’t something like arousing.)

Slowly, very uncertain he’s making the right choice, Hakuryuu mumbles, “Don’t get mad if I don’t do it right.”

Judal likes getting what he wants. He likes it even more from people like Hakuryuu, those that are always so reluctant, because it takes a little bit of effort and it's all the more satisfying. For that, he can almost forgive Hakuryuu for making everything else such a pain. "I won’t, I won’t." In one, easy movement, Judal wriggles to the side, ending up sitting in the throne as he shoves Hakuryuu out of it. He reclines back, looking very, very pleased with himself.

Hakuryuu stumbles to his feet in time to stare, aghast. “You can’t--you can’t expect me to--to do that here! On--on the throne? Have you no shame at all?” he demands, hoping that doesn’t sound quite as hypocritical as it feels, given how hard, how obviously hard he is between his thighs.

Judal's eyebrows arch. "It's not like there's anyone watching. Well, except me, of course, and I really wanna see what you look like on your knees, soo…”

“Forget it.” God, he’s bright red, but the second he tries to leave, Zagan says something ridiculously perverted in his ear, and suddenly his legs are too heavy, and his wooden arm hits the ground at force as he topples forward, landing between Judal’s legs. “I--I didn’t mean to do that, my djinn is
Unfazed, Judal simply reaches down to grab a handful of Hakuryuu's hair, pulling him forward between his spread legs. "He really is a bad match for you," he 'sympathetically' replies, wriggling a bit to ease his pants down and free his cock—achingly hard already, with just a bead of precome on the flushed tip of it. "I would have chosen a better dungeon for you… but…" Judal sighs, eyes fluttering as he drags his thumb over the tip of his cock, swiping it over Hakuryuu's lips as he pulls him forward. "Didn't get the chance."

All talk of djinns and dungeons, something Hakuryuu would usually have loved to talk about with Judal for a change, flies clear out the window at the first drag of a man’s cock across his lips. “God, I--I can’t do this,” he mutters, tugging against the hand in his hair, trying to turn his face away. It’s odd, slick and hard and sort of rubbery, or spongey, and when he opens his mouth to protest….

Well, the taste isn’t that bad. It doesn’t taste nearly as gross as he’d expected. Not that he likes it, god, no.

Just enough that he doesn’t pull away as hard as he probably should.

"Stop whining," Judal huffs out, sliding his fingers more firmly against Hakuryuu's scalp to drag him forward. At least those protests are good for something—It makes it easier to guide his cock into Hakuryuu's mouth, sliding it past his lips and against his tongue with a bit of effort. "Just… ahh, it's not like it's difficult, and I know I don't taste bad."

Hakuryuu sort of wishes he could argue.

Except….

He sort of doesn’t, not when the sheer illicit forbiddenness of this makes him so hard. It’s so new, so scandalous when all sex has ever been is a parade of women led around like livestock, bored as they wait to be impregnated by whoever’s highest in rank. This is different, this is a powerful Magi holding him on his knees, shoving a cock into his mouth, and that’s disgusting, degrading, and makes his cock throb painfully inside his robes.

If nothing else, Judal is a damn good judge of what people like in bed.
Hakuryuu is so transparent that it's almost too easy, though, especially when he fists his hands tighter into the man's hair, tugging his head down. He's _careful_ at first, but it's hard not to just rut up against Hakuryu's face, and Judal wriggles, idly sliding a bare foot down to press between his legs. "You really _are_ enjoying this, aren't you?" he mutters, and his hips twitch up, sliding his cock further along Hakuryuu's tongue. "I'd tell you to lick it and suck it a little, but you might like it more if I just use your mouth as a hole."

Hakuryuu hates it when Judal is right. He hates it all the time in general, hates it more _now_, hates the idea that he's so bloody transparent as to be obvious. To lick, to _suck_, god forbid, would be the height of debauchery--but for some reason, it feels so much more real, so much more filthy, exciting, just to be held down.

The foot between his legs is no kind of fair, and Hakuryuu lets out a sloppy groan around Judal's cock, lurching forward to try and get _more_.

Judal swallows hard around a groan of his own, his eyes fluttering as his hips jerk forward on their own accord. Better not to try and stop himself now, not when Hakuryuu obviously _likes_ it that way, and it's hard to deny that _he_ likes the sloppy, unpracticed way that Hakuryuu's lips wrap around him, the way he half-chokes even with the slightest thrust, and so fisting both hands into his hair, dragging him down mercilessly and letting his hips arch up at the same time…

"If you want more," Judal pants out, eyes lidded and dark as he yanks again, forcing Hakuryuu's head down until it won't go any further, until every inch of his cock presses its way down his throat, "then here's _more_."

Judal must like it when he chokes. Hakuryuu holds onto that as some kind of lifeline, because obviously Judal doesn't hate what he's doing enough to make him _stop_. He chokes, gagging hard around every thick inch pressed down his throat, eyes streaming tears and trying not to retch, one hand scrabbling at Judal's thigh.

He's so preoccupied trying not to choke and die that he hardly realizes how damned _close_ he is, and with a hiccupsing jerk, lurches forward, gagging extra-hard on a massive mouthful as he spills onto the cold tile of the throne room, every part of him shivering, trembling as he sucks.

_Damn_, but it's hard not to come.

Judal _wants_ to. He wants to paint Hakuryuu's face or make him swallow every drop or maybe even _both_. His cock is so hard that he throbs against Hakuryuu's tongue, and it takes _effort_ to haul his head off of his cock, to drag him up and into his lap, sticky and shivering in his robes.
"You're kinda made for this," Judal mutters, biting at Hakuryuu's shoulders, at his neck—all long, sucking bites that are sure to leave marks in their wake. His fingers shake as they shove at those robes, pushing them up, annoyed by the amount of them ('emperors' wear way too much) especially when it comes to sliding his cock against the curve of Hakuryuu's ass. "How much are you gonna bitch at me if I want to put it in?"

"Don't!" Hakuryuu yelps, suddenly more aware than ever that Judal, for all his slinky grace, is not a small man. He’s got several inches on Hakuryuu, and like this, dragged into the Magi’s lap, he can tell. He swallows hard, wooden hand scrabbling at the throne, a high, panicky edge to his voice. “I--you can’t do that!"

"Whiny," Judal sighs at him, and he firmly catches hold of Hakuryuu's chin, dragging a pair of fingers over his lips before shoving them into his mouth. "Suck, if you want me to be careful with you. It's not even that big," he adds, leaning forward to nip at Hakuryuu's shoulder, baring it with a swift yank of the other man's robes. Unsurprisingly, Hakuryuu looks good dishelved and with everything slinking off of him. "You're just tiny."

"Not--tiny--" Hakuryuu mutters, squirming away from Judal's bite, no longer making too much of an effort to get away. He can’t get the idea out of his head that sucking cock on his knees is one thing, but being bugged in the Great Hall might be totally different. And it’s not turning him on, he tries explaining to his dick, even as he reluctantly parts his lips for Judal’s fingers. Hey, he’s had worse in his mouth in the last ten minutes.

"Definitely tiny," Judal lowly teases, his eyes lidding as his fingers twist against Hakuryuu's tongue. It's actually obscene how good the man's lips look wrapped around things, and that's distracting, enough to make his hips jut up, his cock sliding slick and dripping along the cleft of Hakuryuu's ass. "Don't even know if I'll make it inside of you--have you ever thought about being fucked?" His hand pulls free, slick with saliva, and drags down to that tight little hole. "Or is that just too improper for someone like you?"

Hakuryuu brings up his hands to shove Judal away, and dammit, he has no idea how they wind up on Judal’s shoulders, helping to brace himself when Judal’s fingers brush over a place of him that’s so startlingly, intimately private. “I--not that it’s improper, I just don’t think about--”

His voice turns into a desperate little squeak when a finger slips in. That’s….definitely new. “I--that’s too much--"

Funny how Hakuryuu's whining is a turn-on in sex, rather than an annoyance. "Can't be too much, it's just one," Judal sighs against his throat, biting lightly again as he wriggles it in deeper, steadying
Hakuryuu’s hips with his other hand. "You make cute noises with just this much in you. Can't wait to hear the noises you make when it's my cock stuffing you full," he murmurs, holding Hakuryuu firmly still when he pulls his hand back just enough to slowly press another finger inside. "Until then--relax, wasn't kidding about you being tiny."

Hakuryuu thrashes, tears coming to burn his eyes, his legs giving out, and he's about to yell, to tell Judal to cut it out, he’s the Emperor and he doesn’t want this--

And then he realizes, Judal’s talking like someone who’s done this before.

From what he’s heard, Judal’s done this before a lot, and from Hakuryuu’s position, and the thought comes that Judal probably didn’t scream and cry.

Anything that bratty Magi can take, I can too.

Hakuryuu calms the wracking breaths with iron will, hands gripping Judal’s shoulders for dear life, and lets his head sag down, shuddering. “Go on. Put it in. I can take it.”

Cute, Judal wants to dryly remark, because by the way Hakuryuu is squeezing around his fingers, shivering and shuddering when he obviously is trying not to, he can't take a damned thing. Still, he's too eager to really care, so hard that he's sure he'll come even if he gets it in at all, and so he pulls his hand free, dragging Hakuryuu up closer after spitting on his own hand and dragging it over the flushed length of his cock.

"I don't mind if you wail and cry, you know.” It's hard to even rub against that slick little hole, and Judal bites his lip, fingers squeezing tight around the base of his cock as he pushes in. It takes effort to get the head inside, his own hips twitching up, his hands pulling Hakuryuu down, and even then Hakuryuu is so tight, not quite slick enough that it makes Judal suck in a fast, ragged breath, his teeth nipping hard into the other man’s shoulder.

Hakuryuu’s resolve to be strong lasts approximately a second after the head of Judal’s cock shoves inside him.

It’s far, far, far too big, a hell of a lot bigger than the nothing he’s taken up there before, and the noise he lets out is pathetic, louder than it should be, sounding more like it belongs to an animal than a human being. He clutches desperately at Judal’s shoulders, chest wracked with sobs as he wriggles, trying to make his legs cooperate, trying to raise up on his goddamn knees to try and take the strain
off, but to no avail. It's an overwhelming stretch, being stuffed so full, and no amount of thinking about how Judal is going to make fun of him can shut him up.

Judal's vision sparks white around the edges, and god, it's hard to urge Hakuryuu down the rest of the way, harder still not to just come from his wriggling and that tight, aching clench around him already. His teeth set themselves to the other man's shoulder again, his eyes rolling back into his head when he finally manages to pull Hakuryuu down all the way, his hips thrusting up hard to bury his cock to the hilt. "Fuck," is the breathless, shuddery exhale against Hakuryuu's throat, and Judal sags back for a moment, his hands splaying their way over Hakuryuu's hips, sliding down to squeeze his ass and then dragging to where they're connected, thumb brushing over that tight, tight clench of muscle. "You feel really good."

Nothing in his life has ever felt like Judal’s cock shoved up his ass. Hakuryuu’s mouth falls open, an odd, breathless shriek coming from his mouth as he twitches, urgent, trembly little movements all he can manage as he gulps for air. “I--you’re--”

He can’t even think, he’s stuffed so full of cock, and with a long, shuddering groan, Hakuryuu slides helplessly, bonelessly back down, the tight arch of his back slumping. It feels oddly good, if a cramping, slow-burning ache can feel good, and Hakuryuu blinks the tears back, numb hands fumbling down to cover Judal’s on his hips, strangely enjoying the feel of them there.

"Yeah," Judal breathlessly agrees, his eyes lidding as he gives those slim hips a squeeze. "I'm in really deep, aren't I?"

It's one thing having his cock shoved up in a girl, something else when it's another man--far rarer, that, and the company of men he keeps generally not lending itself to that, anyway. Hakuryuu, though… the way he squeezes and squirms and just sort of melts atop him--that's nice, and makes Judal bite his lip as he thrusts upward, fingers digging in harder to pull Hakuryuu down at the same time. His cock is so achingly hard that it almost hurts, and his eyes cross a bit, breath a shuddering, ragged thing when he tries to remember how to inhale.

Hakuryuu can’t remember quite how sex works right now.

He remembers his lessons, remembers that first fumbling time on top of a girl, being reprimanded for apologizing and seeing her bite her lip uncomfortably. It had all been sort of dry, if exciting for being the first time, and it had certainly been nothing like this.

He tries to breathe, only to have it come out in a sobbing whine, tears streaming from his eyes as he tries to move. Fails at breathing, fails at moving, and all he can do is cling helplessly to Judal, cock
rubbing painfully hard against the Magi’s stomach with every yank of Judal’s hands on his shoulders. “P-please--”

Judal huffs out a hot breath, presses a hard, sucking kiss to the side of Hakuryuu’s throat, and yanks him close, squirming underneath him to better arch his hips up, pressing up long and smooth and deep. "You’re… god, you’re the one that looks like a harem boy right now," he groans, eyes squeezing shut as he ruts up into Hakuryuu, fingers squeezing tight around his waist, and it’s hard not to let his fingers splay a bit over his stomach. If he thrusts up hard enough, deep enough, he can almost feel his cock inside because Hakuryuu is so slight, so small. "L-look how hard you are, you really like this."

Hakuryuu’s eyes roll back into his head, little pleas falling from his lips no matter how he thinks viciously at them to shut up. He can hardly blame himself; there isn’t a thought in his mind that isn’t screaming Judal’s cock is in me, it’s in me, it’s inside me!

Every movement he makes is colored by that prickling, creeping, too-hot fullness, every breath tainted with a sob from how deep Judal is, every scrabble of his fingers centered around he’s in me, he’s in me.

He gasps for air, shoving himself mindlessly down, hardly even sure what’s happening anymore, just pushing against the greatest source of pleasure as hard as he can, whimpering, “Just--a little--more--”

More is something Judal can give, and eagerly. He can’t help but bite when he shoves up deep, fucks Hakuryuu hard and pulls him into each hard thrust, muffling his groans and shuddering, breathy noises into those long, sucking bites that he knows will leave marks. How he’s held out this long is beyond him when he was already riled enough just from Hakuryuu sloppily sucking his cock, and it’s with a mindless, too-rough shove that he buries himself in as deep as he can, hands bruising on Hakuryuu’s hips to hold him in place as he comes hard, his vision nearly blanking out when tension unravels from him in one, shaky spasm.

Hakuryuu’s mind shorts out, his entire body a clenching, twisting thing when Judal uses him hard and fast, uses him like nothing more than one of those harem boys, uses him like a pleasure-slave, and a broken cry comes from his mouth at that idea. He slumps forward onto Judal’s shoulder, clinging hard as his body trembles and twitches, hardly feeling any more overwhelmed when he spills desperately against Judal’s stomach.

It only takes seconds after Judal stops moving for it to feel like way too much inside him, and Hakuryuu groans, burying his forehead on Judal’s shoulder. “Can’t…..can’t.”
"Shut up," Judal groans, butting his head against Hakuryuu's shoulder in turn and giving his hips another pointed squeeze. "Not pulling out yet. You feel good, all hot and really slick in there now." He mouths a wet kiss to the arc of Hakuryuu's throat before biting gently, scraping his teeth over the bob of his Adam's apple. "Maybe I'll fuck you again, now that you're all relaxed."

Hakuryuu makes a sound of protest.

Yeah, that's what that is.

“It’s….s’bigger than you said,” he mutters into Judal’s shoulder, not wanting to pull back until he stops crying. Judal’s teeth makes him clench down, which makes him squirm, and ah, he really wants it to feel worse than this, somehow.

"Not sure if that's a compliment or not, coming from someone that's so whiny about it," Judal sighs, his eyes lidded as he wriggles, unable to stop himself from lazily rolling his hips upward, liking the obscenely slick slide of his cock even if it's soft and a little too sensitive. "Keep squeezing down like that and I'll get hard again."

It’s a pathetic moan this time, and Hakuryuu can’t even tell himself if he’s trying to do as Judal says or trying to pull off. “I--that was a lot,” he mutters, face flaming at the realization of how good he feels now, how empty and debauched and good. He can’t remember caring so little about the fate of the world and the Empire and everything, and the idea of those thoughts rushing back is enough to make him clench deliberately down. Make them go away again. “You can….again. If you want.”

"You are sort of made for this, aren't you?" The next roll of Judal's hips is a just as languid as the last, his cock twitching inside of Hakuryuu when he squeezes. His eyes flutter shut with a groan, and Judal's hands slide up Hakuryuu's back, idly tugging at the ties and pins in his already mussed hair once they're up far enough. "Better," he sighs out, looking terribly pleased with his handiwork when he has something better to tug. "Now you even look the part."

Good.

Hakuryuu remembers, vaguely, the days when he’d worn his hair long. After the wounds had healed enough not to hurt at every brush of hair, it had been easy to hide behind the silken fall when he was exhausted, easy to pretend for just a minute, walking by a mirror, that he was still normal-looking. Then he’d taken that shame and worn it as armor, tying his hair back defiantly, showing his scars to the world.
Just now, he welcomes that long-gone chance to hide his face. It changes things, makes his moans softer, more frequent, and he even tries bucking his hips, not worrying for once what everyone will think of him, just feeling the pleasure of the slick, tight squeeze inside of him.

Hakuryuu being even the slightest bit eager isn't fair. Judal chokes on a moan, his nails scoring their way down the other man's back as his own hips twitch up, hissing at how slick it all is now, how hot when Hakuryuu squirms on top of him like he loves it. "Wish I had known that was a button earlier," Judal breathlessly teases, tangling one hand loosely into Hakuryuu's hair to properly tug on the mass of it, pulling his head back just enough to better bite at his throat. "Arch your back… just a bit more… when you push down," he coaxes, splaying his fingers over Hakuryuu's lower back to convince him of the idea. "It'll go deeper… and maybe I can get at something really good this time."

"B-but--"

Hakuryuu strangles down a protest. Protesting didn’t get him here, like this, with Judal shoved up inside him and hands touching him, making him feel good, not hurting him but touching him anyway.

Slowly, shakily, he arches his back, and true to Judal’s word, it goes in deep. “I--ahhhh, there it--”

He swallows hard, letting the hair fall back from his face as he pushes down, eyes half-closed as he whimpers at the extra stretch. “It’s--really tight still--”

"Told you, you're just tiny," Judal sighs, eyes lidding as he slowly thrusts up, taking his time now. It makes Hakuryuu writh on his cock, and that's enough to make him achingy hard again, especially when Hakuryuu is doing what he says, if not a little hesitantly. "You wouldn't like it as much if it wasn't too much, though," he murmurs, and he teasingly slides a finger down, tracing that stretch of muscle around his cock. "You could probably still take more."

A low, broken moan comes from Hakuryuu’s mouth, and he twitches in protest. “I’m--no, I’m so full--”

He can’t even tell if he’s blushing anymore or not. Maybe he’s lost all his shame, acting like a whore on a Magi’s lap, spreading his thighs for a cock to shove up inside of him. He can’t even think of anything more shameless than where he is right now--so why not throw caution to the wind, bucking down on Judal’s cock and letting it feel good?
“You--said you were gonna--find something good in me,” he breathes, pulling back for the first time to look into Judal’s eyes as his own lid heavily.

"You already look like you're feeling pretty damn good." Judal grins, but he pulls his hand away for now, finding it more enjoyable to grab at Hakuryuu's hips, to pull him down as he slides up harder inside of him again. The way Hakuryuu squeezes around him isn't fair, and makes his breath hitch when he squirms to snap his hips up at a sharper angle, his own teeth clenching at that twinge. "You're… god, the way your face looks when I fuck you like that," he mutters, rolling his hips up again in that same way.

Hakuryuu opens his mouth to say something. Then the head of Judal’s cock, spongy-hard and relentless, strikes at a new angle, and the few ragged thoughts left in Hakuryuu’s mind dissolve into nothingness, into starlight, into a shuddering, whimpering plea for more more more--

He hardly notices when he starts bucking hard, shoving himself down over and over again, searching for that bliss. Every time he hits it he lets out a curse and his eyes fly open, hands digging in hard to Judal’s shoulder, his own cock hardening again. “Just--”

Can’t think.

“Right--”

There, there, there--

“A little--”

More.

Damn, but he should have played with Hakuryuu like this before.

Judal can't help but think it would solve a lot of problems for the kid to be thoroughly fucked all the time--or at least, make him a little easier to deal with. Now that he's really got Hakuryuu writhing again, Judal can't help but roll with a grunt of effort, shoving Hakuryuu down into the seat of the throne as he stands on wobbly legs, one of his own hands braced against the back of it as he uses that greater leverage to thrust deep, his head tipping back with a ragged exhale. "You look," he pants out, grabbing at Hakuryuu's hips, hauling him to the edge of the throne and holding him there as he
shoves in, vision blurring at that hot, too-slick slide, "like a pleasure-slave. Suits you far more, being on the throne like this."

Hakuryuu protests.

Sure, that’s what that sound is.

It isn’t his fault if it sounds like a desperate, useless moan of agreement, if he thrashes on Judal’s cock and tries to get more, if all he can do is wrap his arms and legs around the Magi, clinging for dear life as he’s fucked into the throne, over and over, and a tiny dark part of him wants to know what everyone would think if they could see him now.

“Then--” He can barely talk, but he makes an effort, legs trembling as they wrap around Judal’s waist. “Then use me like a pleasure-slave.”

Ah, fuck, that's really not fair.

Judal sucks in a ragged breath, not needing to be told twice when he has Hakuryuu clinging to him, whining and begging and crying, and his fingers are like claws against the other man's hips, his mouth hot and eager against his throat as his hips snap forward. It's easy to hold him down when Hakuryuu is so slight and almost delicate feeling in his grasp, stretched around his cock and shivering like he'll snap in two each time Judal shoves in particularly deep.

The best part is sliding in hard enough that Hakuryuu groans, and then drawing it out with a long, hard roll of his hips, making him mewl like a cat in heat before he draws back again. Judal rocks back, glancing down with a heated exhale at where they're joined, watching the needy pull of Hakuryuu's body, that slick, sweet clench around his cock--

"Fuck," he mutters, shutting his eyes to try and get ahold of himself, but there's really nothing for it.

Judal pulls out at the last second, his hand squeezing tight around his cock for one last, slick, sticky stroke, and he fists his other hand in Hakuryuu's hair, wrenching his head up, pulling his body up just enough so that he can see when Judal spills over his spread thighs, down the cleft of his ass, messily marking him up as if he really were worth only as much as a slave.

Hakuryuu’s vision swims, and he doesn’t even hear his own words anymore, a senseless, moaning
babble of half-words and pleas. All his awareness is narrowed to Judal, to Judal’s hands, Judal’s mouth, Judal’s words, Judal’s cock striking deep inside him with every roll of his hips. He can’t think, can’t speak, can’t even breathe when finally he’s starkly, suddenly empty.

The hot pulse of wet slick heat over his ass and thighs makes Hakuryuu gasp, trembling on the throne, hair pulled uncomfortably tight as he does as he’s wordlessly commanded, watching the spill of the Magi’s seed over him, making him used, filthy, worthless behind the hard bob of his own cock. He sags back to the throne, bat-tling uselessly at one of Judal’s hands, trying to bring it to his cock. “Just—-a second, just—-”

"I've got you, hold on," Judal mutters, mouthing a hot, wet kiss to the curve of Hakuryuu's shoulder as he grabs at his cock, groaning at how hard Hakuryuu feels within his grasp as he strokes and squeezes. "You really… you really fucking love this, don't you? Nothing more than a harlot."

It should feel wrong, to be grasping onto Judal like a savior, a lover, a friend. Dimly, Hakuryuu knows there’s a part of him that should be pushing Judal away—but right now, Judal’s mouth is hot and sweet, his hands sure and warm, and Hakuryuu just feels taken care of, touched gently and thoroughly, bucking into Judal’s grasp. “Love it,” he murmurs mindlessly, watery eyes sliding shut as he writhes on the throne. He bucks into Judal’s grip, looks up once, and lets go

The tremors wrack his body worse than before, and the groan that comes from his mouth is long, drawn-out, piteous as he spills again even if he hadn’t thought it possible, leaving him a twitching, moaning lump of a thing, hands grasping feebly at Judal to pull him closer.

"Really good," Judal murmurs in praise, another, absent kiss pressed to that bruised throat as he drags his hand away, up through the mess on Hakuryuu's stomach before bringing it to his lips to slowly suck his fingers clean. He knows that look on Hakuryuu's face, something akin to utter surrender and ecstasy, and Judal is content to let him ride it out, mouthing languid kisses over his neck, along his jaw, giving that beauty mark of his another nip because he can't help himself.

Just now, Hakuryuu can’t mind the weird attention to his beauty mark. Judal’s mouth feels good everywhere. Everything feels good everywhere right now, even the pain, surging through him like waves of nameless intensity with every shudder. “That…..”

He gives up talking. Too hard.

"Yeah. I know." Judal hums underneath his breath as he draws back, sliding down to the floor in front of the throne with a sigh as his legs wobble and threaten to give out. "Ahhh, princes-pretending-to-be-emperors have nice beds, right?"
That’s an insult.

Hakuryuu tries to remember that later. Right now, he just nods once toward his bedroom. “Yeah. That way.”

"Good."

Judal grabs half-heartedly at his wand where he tossed it aside, wriggles back into his pants, and spares one look at Hakuryuu before the idea of carrying him becomes too much. Floating him there works just as well. "When you're done sleeping this off," Judal cheerfully says, letting him drop onto the bed with a solid thump before following him, "we can talk about how you're going to be very open to my ideas."

“Smprulmurm,” Hakuryuu retorts, facedown and half-conscious. That should show him.
Chapter 14

Koumei had suspected, of course, that it wouldn’t work. Gyokuen is too powerful, too *inhuman*, to be brought entirely down by something as small as an assassin’s dart—even one through her neck. It’s a concern he’s been hesitant to address the last several hours, because really, no one wants to listen to reason after something good has happened. No one wants to think *Yes, we killed the great evil, and we all know she’ll be back.*

Damned if he’ll let his younger brother pay the price for that, though.

It’s on the way to the Great Hall in En’s wake that he grabs Kouha, pulling him into an alcove, letting the self-righteous storm past. “Wait,” he murmurs, eyes lidding. “There are going to be dark deeds tonight, little brother.”

"What does that even *mean*?” Kouha is restless—and with good reason, all things considered. En being freed again is an encouragement to stop *hiding,* to stop sneaking about and slipping into Koumei’s rooms at the oddest hours to actually *see* him, and so being told that standing at his eldest brother’s side again isn’t a good idea…

The problem is that Koumei is rarely wrong.

Kouha scowls. "I want to help him."

“You can. I promise.” Koumei’s eyes lid heavily, darting up and down the hall under the guise of sleepiness. Useful, that. “I have a feeling. Tonight is going to be bloody. Get your sword on the way, put on something fancier so you have an excuse. Hurry.”

Kouha's eyes narrow a bit. "And what are you going to do?" he presses, latching a hand onto Koumei's sleeve. "If it's going to be bloody, you don't need to be there."

“I’ve got my knives with me,” Koumei assures him, moving to let Kouha feel the long line of hilts sewed into his sleeves. “When everything starts, I’ll hide in the corner and use my djinn. I can make your battle easier, I—” He swallows hard, noting the shadows. “Be *careful.*” Useless his djinn may be, but it does give him a much higher sensitivity to the magical currents moving through the palace—and tonight, they’re restless and dark.
None of that sounds terribly reassuring, no matter what Koumei says. "You'd make it easier by not being there," he grumbles, though he knows Mei isn't just going to stay out of it, not this time. Reluctantly, Kouha releases his sleeve. "Sometimes, you're really dumb, Mei."

“You’re not the only one who needs me.” Koumei licks his lips, and starts to pull out of the alcove. “I don’t need to tell you this, but focus on protecting En. He’s not listening to me and he’s the one that’s going to need the most help.”

Maybe he's not the only one that needs Koumei, but--

Kouha grinds his teeth, shoving back the annoying thoughts and stepping out after him. "So much for that assassin being useful," he mutters, reaching out to give Koumei's ponytail a last, rather clingy tug before turning the opposite direction. "I'll be there in a minute, okay?"

“I’ll make sure the party doesn’t start without you,” Koumei murmurs wryly. For a moment, he considers trying to lock Kouha up in his room for the night, but only for a moment. Ha's earned more than that, especially from him, and he’s about a thousand times more useful in something like this than Koumei is.

He slips into the Hall without much notice, silently taking a place at En’s side in the March, lidded eyes sweeping around, taking in the assassin, the Magi, the pretender Hakuryuu, and Hakuei at his side. Ah, this is where things will get sticky.

Kouen strides purposefully up to the dais, purposely ignoring Hakuryuu and bowing instead to Hakuei. “My thanks, gracious lady, for ensuring the continued warmth of my throne in my brief absence. I hope it was not too much of a burden.”

Hakuei's expression shifts wry in spite of herself. Really, of all the insults to be thrown about, did Kouen have to involve her in the mix? "… Honestly, Prince Kouen, it might be in your best interest to--"

"It took you long enough to get out of those dungeons, Kouen," Judal grumpily interrupts, untangling himself from the throne he's draped over to hop down the dais. "Should a king of mine really be so easily locked away?"

“Should a Magi,” Kouen retorts sharply, enough to make the nearby guards shift, “be fawning over one so unworthy?"
Hakuryuu’s jaw sets, his eyes blazing as he stands. “This is not your throne!” he spits, wooden hand creaking on the staff of his glaive. “Perhaps if you kneel before it, I won’t have you stripped of all your titles and thrown into the streets!”

"Ryuut--" Hakuei hisses underneath her breath, making to rise as well.

"Quit it," Judal growls, his wand in hand as his arm swings out, blocking Hakuryuu's path. "You and I already talked, so don't stir up more shit." His eyes slit, head cocking as he looks back to Kouen. "And, what? You're keeping Sindria's cast-offs now? At least my playthings are always of high blood."

Kouen pauses for a moment, unsure until he sees Judal’s eyes swing to Ja’far, and his jaw tightens. “He’s not my plaything. He was a tool, and now he has served his purpose.” He shoots an iron glance at Ja’far, then turns back. “What of his master? Did you really release such an important prisoner?”

“The--the deal was made,” Hakuryuu says unevenly. Not my deal, I didn't make it, but he doesn’t want Kouen turning that gaze on his sister, either. “My family cleans up its own mess.”

"Ahhh, some common, irritating ground," Judal sighs, spinning his wand between his fingers. "I wasn't very happy about Sinbad's release either, you know. If Freckles has served his purpose, then use him as bait to get the bastard back here."

"Our quarrel isn't with Sindria," Hakuei sharply interrupts, rising from her seat once and for all. "There's no need to encourage that war--En, what use could you possibly have in keeping Sinbad as a prisoner? Shouldn't…” Shouldn't we be focusing on getting out from underneath Al-Sarmen's hold now, of all times, not furthering it? Damn, but that's impossible to say with Al-Sarmen's Magi standing right there.

Slowly, Ei’s words sink in, and Kouen takes a deep, steadying breath. “You’re right. My quarrel isn’t with Sindria right now. Assassin, you can leave, scurry back to your master like a good dog. My quarrel now is with anyone who would stand between me and the throne that is mine by right.” His eyes set on Hakuryuu, tense, waiting.

Hakuryuu’s heart beats fast in his throat. Maybe, if Kouen chooses the wrong djinn first, if Judal is by his side, if Ei doesn’t bow to him, maybe, he has a chance. He flicks a glance first at Judal, then at his sister. Please. “I suppose that depends on who believes it’s your throne, cousin.”
Good dog my ass, Ja'far irritably thinks, trying very hard not to roll his eyes. Ungrateful wretches, the lot of them. That being said--"Hakuryuu," he lowly puts in, "what you told King Sinbad, about destroying this country--you won't do that in the place you are now. You're simply riling it against you."

"… I'm sorry, Ryuu," Hakuei quietly agrees. "The empire's throne--"

"--is En's!"

From the Great Hall's doorway, Kouha's sword swings out to firmly point in Hakuryuu's direction. "Do you have any idea how many men have died to see En on the throne? You've never seen a battlefield except at your sister's side, don't even begin to deign yourself worthy of this empire!"

This isn't what I meant, Koumei thinks, magical currents flooding through him in a panic. You were supposed to be backup, not against this pretender, let his sister squash him down, this is exactly what--

What she's been waiting for.

The nameless dread he's been feeling takes form, in a dark wind that screams howling through the hall, sending tapestries flapping to the ground and makes half the inhabitants throw an arm over their eyes. When the dust clears, it resolves itself into the figure of Gyokuen, a sickly-sweet smile on her face as she looks around. "Ah, my beloved children. Waiting to welcome your Empress home?"

Even Judal makes a face, though he tries his best to hide it. "Go figure," he mutters, then adds more loudly, sweetly, "that no mere assassin would be able to kill you. Welcome back, Mom."

Gyokuen slinks over to the throne, cupping Judal’s face in her hands. “Of course not, sweetling,” she coos, and gives him a slightly too-long kiss on the lips. “Baby,” she murmurs, turning to Hakuryuu, “don’t you have something better to do? Why don’t you run along and play, the adults are busy.”

Hakuryuu leaps to his feet, face twisted into a snarl. “I will never give this throne to you! I’ll die on it first!”
Koumei shoots a glance out the corner of his eye to Kouha, then to Kouen. *Wait for it.*

Judal thinks he fares decently enough when it comes to not gagging, though just barely. *Fucking hell, you owe me for this,* he irritably thinks as he catches Hakuryuu's gaze before grabbing for Gyokuen's arm. "I already had a talk with him, it's reeeallly not an issue," he sighs. "C'mon, after nearly dying like that, shouldn't you be resting?"

"Fuck this," Kouha mutters, nerves drawn taut enough that *waiting* isn't something he can really stand to do. "Gyokuen, sta--"

Ja'far's hand solidly thwacking over his mouth puts an end to his order for her to get the hell off the throne, and Kouha feels rather oddly like there are two Meis in the room, one a little more proactive and hands on. *Not sure if want.*

Gyokuen turns her gaze, still smiling, from Hakuryuu over to Kouha, letting her eyes rake slowly up and down every inch of him, untold dark promises glinting behind her lashes. *Oh, yes,* she whispers into his mind. *I will have you soon, little princeling.*

“All those who would not bow to my rule, speak now.”

Yeah, he's done with this.

Kouha shoves Ja'far's arm aside, Solomon's seal glinting on the side of his sword as he brandishes it in an open threat. "I'll kill you before you have a chance to sit on that throne again," he bluntly replies.

Inwardly, Judal suppresses a groan. Well, there went *that* attempt. Sometimes, this family makes it *really hard* to keep them in mind as king candidates.

*Shit.*

Koumei can almost see the wheels turning in his brother's head--Kouen, not Kouha, Kouha doesn't have wheels--trying to see if he can turn this to his advantage, trying to see if he can still sweep this under the rug, return things to the bloodless long game of before.
**Enough of that. He’s not the one who got stabbed by her bastard assassins.**

And like hell he’s letting that witch focus all her attention on Kouha, anyway.

Koumei peels off of En’s side, and moves to stand next to Kouha. “En,” he says quietly, not missing the flash of Gyokuen’s eyes, “it’s time.”

There’s a twitch in Kouha’s jaw, and it's sort of cute how he tries to be subtle about inching just slightly in front of Koumei. Well--now isn’t the time to be passive about anything, Hakuei notes, and her eyes lid as she sidesteps her mother, neatly making her way down from the dais. ”Mother,” she quietly says, and reaches for Kouen's arm as she turns to face the woman again, ”please step down.”

A little shove and flutter of otherwise unseen rukh might have pushed Hakuryuu forward after his sister. Just might have.

As much as Hakuryuu hates the idea of standing anywhere near Kouen, even with Hakuei, he hates the idea of being near his mother far, far more. And besides, there’ll always be time to wrest his rightful throne away from Al-Sarmen’s clutches after Mother is gone, after all. “You,” he says shakily to his mother, clutching his glaive with both hands now, “will never sit on the throne of this Empire again.”

Gyokuen’s smile fades slightly. “Well, well. I’m dead by an assassin’s hand for less than a day, and this is the thanks I come back to? What about you, most beloved?” she purrs, turning to fully face Kouen, smile enchanting. “You always were my favorite. Will you, too, abandon your mother’s side?”

Wheels spin, and click into place, and Kouen’s mouth thins.

“Ah. Well.”

The next second, a wave of dark, creeping magic lashes out, clawing holes into every bolg, black ravenous shapes leaping from Gyokuen’s shadows with the intent of consuming everyone in their paths. “Then I suppose I have no more use for a family.”
How in the world he manages to find himself in these situations time and time again is beyond Ja'far.

Ah, wait, he dimly, irritably thinks, probably because of Sinbad's inability to keep to a plan in a timely matter. A damn good thing, then, that he's far less merciful, far more intent on ending this.

"We're stopping by Judal's rooms."

Kouen barely spares him a glance. "So now you and the Magi are in this together?"

"Hardly. I'd just prefer to finish a job."

Of course, when Judal hadn't been there (and Aladdin had been--god, things Ja'far wasn't quite prepared for), there were few options remaining. Ja'far palms the box within his hand now, contemplative.

At least Judal is an idiot. At least Sinbad won't have to worry about this empire any longer after all of this is done.

*Please have taken a damned boat out of here, Sindria actually needs you.*

"By the way, Judal," Ja'far casually offers, no matter if it's in the midst of everything, "Sinbad left you a gift."

Reflex, probably, bids the Magi to reach out and catch the thing tossed to him--reflex, and the mention of Sinbad. His head cocks, and that's about all that remains before he obviously tunes Gyokuen and magic and inevitable death matches out before opening the box.

The box opens, and death screams out.

The ring, black onyx and perfectly circular, lands in the palm of Judal’s hand with the weight of a lover’s kiss, and everyone in the Hall with a touch of magoi feels the *shift*. Heartbeats skip, sound breaks, and suddenly, the tiny whirring wings of black rukh become visible for everyone to see, whirling around Judal like a tornado, around and through the ring in his palm in a dizzying circle--and Koumei can see with growing horror that on each cycle, fewer and fewer of the dark rukh come
out the other side.

“Get back,” he mutters, voice flat and strange, and none of his limbs want to work right. Something in him breathes to the pulse of that sickening motion, something he sees in everyone standing there, moving closer and closer involuntarily, though none so fast as Gyokuen.

"Back," is Hakuei’s far firmer addition, and she snatches her brother up by the arm, bodily hauling him behind her. “What is that?” she demands of Ja’far, whose gaze snaps back into focus at the sound of her words.

"A magical tool that uses black rukh to spread like a virus." Which I apparently have in me in spades, these days. Odd, how hungry the thing seems to be, and even though it keeps sucking black rukh, there seems to be an endless supply when it comes to Judal--

It latches onto Gyokuen, and it's like dried, crackling paper with how fast she herself seems to go up into veritable smoke, the rukh surrounding her seemingly sucked into a vortex and simply gone.

Koumei lurches sideways, fighting with every step against the pull of it, and grabs onto Ja’far’s arm with fingers like claws. “How do we stop it?” he demands, almost shouting to be heard, even though the storm is more magical than physical. The sound, he knows, is in his head, but that doesn’t keep him from shouting.

Kouen’s arm goes around Hakuei’s waist, eyes blazing. “Get out of here,” he hisses into her ear, shielding her, shielding their child from any possible harm with his body. “Go! I’ll try to contain it somehow.” he promises, and his skin turns to thick leather as he equips a dark djinn, growing far beyond his normal size.

"That's not--"

Ja'far's protests are cut off when the storm ends as quickly as it begins, the tornado of rukh suddenly, abruptly shrinking, twisting and braiding around Judal's form until there is simply nothing. The ring clatters to the ground, a few, lingering bits of rukh fluttering lopsidedly around it before they, too, disappear with a shrill, whining cry, and the ring itself shatters and crumbles to dust.

The release of that hold is immediate, and Ja'far rocks back onto his heels, sucking in a slow breath. Aladdin hardly mentioned something like that happening. He's a bit too suspicious to think that is all there is to it, but damn if they don't need a bit of good luck in the midst of everything.
"… Um?" Kouha attempts.

"That sums it up," Ja'far sardonically mutters, trying to shake the lightheaded feeling away.

The sudden absence—a look around shows Kouen that he’s not the only one feeling it. He hits the ground hard, clutching at his chest, struggling for breath, and dimly notices Hakuryuu doing the same. He can’t even see Gyokuen anymore, save for a little ceramic doll, hitting the floor and spinning in a few slow circles before coming to rest at Hakuei’s foot.

His vision swims, and god, it feels as if half of his life’s been torn away. From where he can see, on his side on the ground, Judal isn’t moving, isn’t even breathing.

"En--" Hakuei immediately kneels, grabbing at his arm, her gaze frantically shifting between her lover and brother, also collapsing. Kouha, though lightheaded, is the one that moves and thinks to grind his heel into the doll, crushing it to the floor with a satisfying crunch.

"I think," Ja'far begins, and ah, moving isn’t fun. His world spins again, and he sags back into the nearest pillar. "I think it ate the black rukh that was inside of us." That isn't what it's supposed to do, necessarily, but he'll take it. Lucky, for once, that they were around two people so entirely consumed by that darkness. And thank god Sinbad wasn't in here.

Koumei is falling over a bit, but then, he’s always falling over a bit. Really, this whole black rukh thing sounds like an excellent excuse to lie down. That’s probably the reason he’s the first to turn and see the slight figure of the blue-haired Magi drift in, concern written all over his face, mutating into delighted relief at the sight of Ja’far. “You’re okay! I--I felt it being used, it was huge! Is everyone--”

"No toppling," Kouha mutters to his brother, grabbing at Koumei even though he's rather on the verge of toppling over himself.

"Fine," Ja'far answers Aladdin, choosing not to give a shit about Judal. That's probably giving some of his black rukh back. Oh well. "Just a little… ah… strange. It burnt through Gyokuen and Judal like wildfire, and I think that sort of… made it go over capacity. And break."

Aladdin bites his lip. “Well, uh, I should have warned you, Titus might have read it wrong. I mean, he’s really smart, but he hasn’t been alive that long, you know? The effects and stuff…he was kind of guessing.”
He turns to Judal’s crumpled form, his face falling. “I….I didn’t think he’d survive,” he admits quietly. “But he didn’t turn into one of those dolls. So I guess he wasn’t all bad, right?” When he turns to Ja’far, his face is forlorn, eyes bright with questions and unshed tears.

*You’re asking the wrong person,* Ja'far thinks, but he refrains from saying it. “… Perhaps not,” he allows instead, his eyes sliding to Judal's form.

Infuriatingly, his chest twitches in a very, very shallow breath.

The selfish part of Ja'far makes him want to not even mention it. Let this be over once and for all, let Sinbad be in peace away from the wretch, and maybe let this empire grow minus a dark organization with a Magi at their backs.

And then there is Aladdin, looking at him and about to cry.

"If you've learned anything about healing in your school," he quietly says, touching Aladdin's shoulder and turning him around, "you might want to use it now."

Aladdin stares in confusion for a moment, then darts a tiny, not-quite-daring-to-hope look over at Judal. The other Magi is mean, but kind of fun to talk to, and Aladdin certainly has never wanted him dead. Even in the middle of war, he’s never wanted anyone dead. He kneels at Judal’s side, searching anxiously--

There.

One tiny, fluttering, panicking little white rukh.

“Hi, friend,” Aladdin whispers, reaching out a hand to the frightened little thing, touching it briefly as it flutters madly around Judal’s head. Aladdin takes a deep breath in, closes his eyes, rests his hands on Judal’s chest, and searches.

Judson’t easy to find.
It echoes in here, in this empty palace of a mind, and Aladdin looks up and down the empty halls, running madly as his body sits and breathes in a deep trance. “Judal?” he calls, steps quickening until he’s flying down every corridor, passing every statue in the blink of an eye. “Judal!”

Aladdin's voice is an odd, distant thing.

More odd is this place where he wakes, dark and oddly cold no matter how Judal isn't sure he's even capable of feeling cold now. Sitting at the foot of an empty throne, hair unbound and clothed in heavy robes that remind him starkly of his childhood, Judal finds himself annoyed more than anything else.

_Just go away._

Aladdin isn't going to fix anything. He's not going to help anything. If that box--that ring really was a gift from Sinbad, then Sinbad wanted him dead. That makes his chest ache when it should feel hollow, and Judal slowly curls himself into a ball, letting his head hit the cold stone floor.

There--that’s a voice, and Aladdin speeds towards it, rounding corners so fast he bounces off of them, rebounding slightly before finding himself in an old, empty throne room that looks a bit like Kou, a bit like Sindria, and a bit...other. Judal, thankfully, is at the foot, and Aladdin’s feet hit the floor as he pads forward, kneeling at the older Magi’s side. “Hey. You can’t sleep here. We have to go, okay?”

"Why?" Judal's eyes lid even as he looks up, making no real attempt to lift his head. "Everyone thinks it's better like this."

His memory flickers back, to the odd way that his name was written on that box--magically transcribed, something locked away only for him. And that signature--"Even you."

Aladdin sits down, tucking his feet under his legs on the cold stone floor. “Yeah,” he admits, honestly. “I don’t want you to hurt anyone anymore.”

"So just leave me here!" Judal snaps back, lurching up onto one elbow. "Did you ever think maybe they deserved to be hurt? Who are you to go around ordering me what to do, anyway?!"

“If you stay here,” Aladdin says thoughtfully, leaning back onto his hands, “you won’t die. You’ll
get locked away in here. Your body will get really old, and the only part of you that moves will be your eyes, and someday when you really want to leave, you’ll be stuck. You can’t die. And you can’t get out, unless you come with me.” He swallows, and holds out his hand. “I don’t want you to hurt anyone. And I don’t want anyone to hurt you. Not even you.”

That's why everyone gets sick of you and leaves!

Everyone is better off without you!

It's strange that Hakuryuu would stand out in his mind at a time like this. Judal's lower lip trembles and he turns his head away, flopping back down to curl himself up into a tight ball, knees drawing up to his chest. "I don't want to go back. There's nothing there."

“But all your friends are out there,” Aladdin urges, poking Judal’s shoulder. “And how are you gonna boss me around and be mean to Sinbad if you’re stuck in here? You still have to choose a king, you told me that's why we’re born!”

"Don't you get it?!" Judal's hand swings out, slapping Aladdin's away. His eyes are too-bright, too-wet, and Judal's chest heaves with the effort it takes not to let tears streak down his face. "None of them want me! Sinbad would rather have you any day! He wants me dead, En just thinks I'm a nuisance, and I don't--I've never had friends!"

“I'll be your friend.” The words come easily to Aladdin, no matter their past history, and he holds out a hand again, even though it stings. “You can travel around with me as long as you want, it’ll be fun!”

"I can't." Judal stares at that hand, his voice shaking. "I can't, they won't let me."

“Who?” Aladdin cocks his head to the side, hand still held out, unwavering. “No one’s going to stop us.”

Judal's breath hiccups, catching in his chest. "You should know."

It's nearly impossible to even think it, let alone say it. Blaming Al-Sarmen of all things--it's opposite to every way he's ever thought (or every way he can remember thinking) and it makes him want to curl up into a ball, to hide underneath his hair and resign himself to his fate of being here alone for
the rest of forever.

*That wouldn't be so different, anyway.*

“But they’re not you. They’re not the you that’s still here.” Aladdin gives Judal a smile, reaching out to tug on his hair. “Come on. Come play with me. No one can stop us, if you want to come.”

Judal sinks down, resting his head onto his arms. "You'll get tired of me. And they can still stop me, they'd kill you."

Aladdin shrugs, hand still held out. “I’m pretty tough! And it’s not so bad to die, right? You just go back to the rukh. Not like being locked in here forever.”

Who the hell even *thinks* like that? Maybe he *is* an awful excuse for a Magi after all, if the idea of dying is so terrifying. Judal stares at Aladdin's hand again, biting at his lip. "I've done so many horrible things to you--why do you still... why are you still trying to help me?"

Aladdin smiles. At least that doesn’t sound angry. “You’re not hurting me now. It’ll be nice to have a friend who’s a Magi, right? For me too!”

"... I'm not a very good one, though." That much he's *definitely* sure of now.

Aladdin’s muscles start to ache, and he lets out a whine. “Oww, my arm hurts,” he complains. “Please? Can we go? I’ll teach you about being a friend, I’ve done it before.”

"I was talking about being a Magi,” Judal mumbles, "though I'm not good at the friend thing, either." He hesitates again, wavering between the idea of just staying here where it's *easier*, knowing as soon as he gets back, there's Al-Sarmen and Kouen looking like he hates him half the time and Hakuryuu always wanting more than he can give and Sinbad wanting but not really wanting him--

"...Promise me you'll just help me *leave,*" he whispers, and reaches out to take Aladdin's hand.

Aladdin beams at him, helping him to his feet. “I promise I'll be a good friend,” he offers, “and help you with whatever feels good to you.” He looks around, at the crumbling stone. “Hurry, we have to
That's the last thing Judal thinks he really *hears* as everything falls around them, shattering and crumbling to shockingly bright white--

He wakes with a deep, ragged gasp of breath, his vision swimming as his eyes snap open. The ceiling of the Imperial Palace throne room looms overhead, and Judal slowly blinks, chest heaving and everything feeling strange, as if there's a deep-bone ache down to his very core.

Judal sags back, shutting his eyes again and making no attempt to rise. In a way, he's starting to understand Koumei's philosophy on life a bit more.

As if he's heard his name being thought of, the second prince of Kou slumps down to the ground next to Judal, a look of startled relief on his face. “You’re alive. You scared us, stupid.”

“Course he’s alive,” Aladdin mumbles, rubbing at his eyes. “Thanks, Ja’far! He’d have died if you didn’t tell me!”

It would be in bad taste to be terribly sarcastic in response to that, wouldn’t it? "You're welcome,” Ja'far settles upon instead, fixing a brief, vaguely worried stare upon Judal before looking away again.

"You don't even like me, don't act so worried," Judal mutters to Koumei, swinging out at hand to swat at him. Wow, that sort of makes him dizzy, too. Lying down and never moving is a great idea.

Koumei snarls a little at the Magi, letting his head flop down to the ground. “Is that the thanks I get for not killing you for dunking my hair in the inkpots all those times?” he asks, eyes rolling up at Judal. “God, ever since you got older it’s like you forgot all the time you spent with Ha and Gyoku in my study. Ungrateful.”

"Ookay, I think it's time we got you somewhere more comfortable, Mei," Kouha butts in, reaching down to haul his brother up no matter how he's wobbly on his own two legs.

"I'm never moving," Judal mumbles, slowly rolling himself into a ball.
“Don’t see why I can’t sleep on the floor,” Koumei mutters, but he’s more than used to letting Kouha drag him around. Plus, that makes it easier to brush his lips over Kouha’s ear, to murmur, “I’m proud of you,” before letting his little brother haul him out of the Hall.

Aladdin flops down onto his back next to Judal, beaming up at Ja’far. “Look! I saved a life! I didn’t want him to die, I told you!”

His smile isn’t entirely forced, though really, of all the people Aladdin could have simply let die… "That you did, Aladdin." Ja’far's eyes swivel to Hakuei, balancing a fiancé on one arm, and brother on the other. "How are they?"

"Both being crybabies about this," she mutters, obviously at her wits end with the situation as a whole. "But they should be fine."

"Good. Then I'm going to go and see about the dozens of slaves that happen to be Aladdin's friends, still locked up within your dungeons." Ja'far's eyebrows raise toward Kouen. "Any objections?"

Kouen tries to get back on his own feet, tries to say something coherent, and winds up sinking halfway down to the floor again with a groan. Something's been ripped away, something ugly and sinuous, but without it it's as if one of his very senses is gone. Balance, from the feel of it. “I--no,” he mutters, burying his face in Hakuei’s shoulder. “Call a damn sedan chair, I’m too heavy for you to carry, woman.”

Hakuryuu, entirely senseless, raises no such protestations.

"I'll tell you what I can and can't carry," Hakuei fairly growls, and in one, solid heave, hauls herself to her feet with Kouen leaning against her side, and Hakuryuu--thank the gods he's a tiny thing--thrown practically over one shoulder.

Ja'far stares for a moment before deciding just to leave her to it--offering her help would probably make her angry, anyway, something he's rather hesitant to ignite. He has enough to take care of, anyway. You better be half-way across the ocean by now, Sin, but I'll catch up in a little while.

Aladdin raises his head, asking wearily, “Can we go home now, Ja’far? I mean….everyone else is going home, and I don’t really have one.”
"That's the idea--and of course you do, I've told you a dozen times that Sindria is your home," Ja'far scolds automatically as he turns toward the door. "Wait for me here. I'll get your friends and we'll go."

Judal's hand swings out, clinging rather firmly to Aladdin's braid.

Aladdin grabs Judal’s hand, beaming. “Got one! Just need the others, okay?”

"That's not..." Ja'far's teeth set into a grind. He knew it was a mistake pointing out that Judal was still alive. "All right," he slowly, calmly manages. "Leave the rest to me." If Judal so much as blinks wrong, that's it.

Suddenly, a blur of motion comes from overhead, a breaking glass window so fast that no one has time to move, has time to dodge before a man-sized figure comes hurtling out of the darkness, landing close enough to knock Ja'far to the ground.

Dusty, bruised, and in clothing more fitted for a slave than a king, Sinbad beams down at Ja'far in relief. “You’re alive! I’ll have to have a talk with Kouen, his guards are far too vigilant about trying to shoot people who climb the walls!”

Ja'far, for his part, prides himself on not screeching, though he certainly does gape from where he finds himself on the floor. "Sin!" A certain amount of disbelief turns to anger, and Ja'far scrambles upright, glowering at his king. "You aren't supposed to be here! Did you even even leave?! You could have been killed!"

“Had to leave,” Sinbad says, picking himself up and not bothering to dust off in the slightest. In his current state, all that would do is pollute the air--and besides, the protective coating of dirt and grime does much to hide the bruises and assorted other marks he’d picked up in the dungeons. “The guards threw me out without telling me a thing. Then I saw this massive storm of blackness, and no one would let me back in the city! So I got back in.”

"Sin..." Anger turns to thoroughly exasperated worry, and Ja'far shakes his head, stripping off the top layer of his robes to drape it around Sinbad's shoulders. Thank god most Kou garments are oversized, though it's still a bit too small to be worn properly--it's something, at least. "I am glad you're fine," Ja'far quietly says, hands lingering a bit longer than necessary, fretting as they better tug the robe about Sinbad's shoulders. "I thought you had already left for Sindria again... so I was going to leave immediately, as soon as I freed the prisoners they took from Magnoshutatt."
It takes will not to flinch from the touch, though Sinbad would never let Ja’far see that. He grins broadly, tugging Ja’far close for a moment before releasing him. “It’s still a good plan. Let the Kou Empire take care of Kou things. Is Aladdin coming with us?”

"…Yes." Ja'far hesitates, his eyes flickering to the pair of Magi. "Apparently, he wants Judal to tag along."

Sinbad’s eyes rake over the two Magi, brows raising. “Won’t Judal protest?”

"Apparently not. That’s… not what I'm concerned about though, and you know it." I don't trust him, how the hell could I even begin to after all of this?

Sinbad sighs out a breath, running a hand back through grungy hair. Ah, the feel of it makes him sick, recalls the long days and nights spent in those dungeons. “At this point, I just want the people who want to be in Sindria to be in Sindria. I don’t care if that’s you or Judal or Ren Kouen himself, I just want home.”

It isn't the answer that he wants to hear, but Sinbad obviously isn't up for arguing or nitpicking at the moment. Ja'far nods, turning for the door again. "Then I will collect the prisoners, and we'll be on our way."

On the floor, Aladdin flops over, nudging Judal with the top of his head. “Hey. Did you hear that? We’re going home.”

Judal slowly, hesitantly nods, though he’s not quite able to look at Sinbad at the moment. "Yeah. Home." A pity, that he doubts Sindria will ever stay that way for him.

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~One Year Later~

Just because it’s been nearly a decade since Koumei’s felt the odd sensation of a child chewing on the end of his hair doesn’t mean he’s forgotten the feeling. He rolls his eyes, twitching his hair out of the baby’s reach, scooping the ungrateful thing off the floor before it can start squalling. “I hate this age,” he mutters to Kouha, slumping back into his chair. “They’re messy and they don’t want to learn how to read. Why the hell am I watching her again?”
"Because you're Auntie Mei," Kouha chirps, reaching out with wiggling fingers to take the baby from Koumei's arms. For a baby that isn't even six months old yet, she has a surprisingly strong grip, considering how tightly she grasps at one of his forelocks and pulls. "Ow, ow, ow--ugh, maybe we should shove her back to Hakuei for a bit, or she's gonna start thinking I have tits again."

"I thought I was the Auntie," Koumei mutters, eyes lidding. "Didn't you hear? She’s out again, En gave her the Third Company to secure the borders."

"Perks of being the Empress," Kouha mutters, expression twisting wry. "When do I get an army again? Just because we downsized doesn't mean I'm not still good at running things like that. 'Downsize' might be an understatement, considering Al-Sarmen's full withdrawal of support when they realized they were minus a witch and a Magi. So much for an empire--Kou found itself back to being a mere country over night, something that made Kouen punch a few walls through before accepting the fact this wasn't such a horrible thing.

Koumei blinks sleepily, and smiles to himself, reaching into his sleeve and pulling out a small, tightly-wound scroll. "I might have told En I'd give you this tonight. I was hoping to give it to you as a reward for good behavior, but if you want it now…"

Kouha perks up immediately, and Koumei finds himself with his arms full of a squirming baby princess once more as Kouha makes a grab for the scroll. "Gimme. And hey, when am I not on my best behavior?"

Koumei’s expression sours again, as he snatches the end of his ponytail out of Koukei’s grasping pudgy hands. "Given how many times I’ve had to tell you to behave," he murmurs, handing the scroll over, "I’d say a few times. Your marching orders, little brother."

"You didn't really mean it those times," Kouha cheerfully replies, and he eagerly unwinds the scroll. "Finally. I've been so bored cooped up here--guess you'll have to babysit without me, though. Drag Gyoku into the job, she could use some practice in tolerating babies."

Koumei vividly remembers the last time he’d tried shoving Koukei into Kougyoku’s hands, and the gagging and tears that had followed at the first spit up. "Pass. I’ll just let her chew on me until she’s old enough to learn the brush. Then maybe she’ll be interesting by the time she turns into a real princess."

"Well, that's how you raised me, so hopefully you're onto something," Kouha lightly retorts, rolling
the scroll back up and tucking it into a fold of his robes with a happy sigh. "Whatever! I won't be
gone too long. I'm fast on my missions, remember? That's why En sends me out."

“Good.” Koumei reaches back over his shoulder, grabbing a handful of his brother’s robes and
tugging him closer. “I miss you too much when you’re gone.” _I worry too much when you’re gone._
“He sends you out because you’re the best at carrying out his orders, you know.”

"Yeah, that's because I know exactly how to get the job done." Kouha grins, leaning over his
brother's shoulder, and twists his head around to press a kiss to the side of his mouth. It isn't like
Kei's gonna tell anyone. "I had a really good teacher."

“I never taught you how to get any job done,” Koumei says with a lazy smile, reaching up and
running a finger down the side of Kouha’s jaw. “Mmm. Should I teach you to shave your face?
You’ll have to start soon or you’ll wind up like En, but pinker.”

Kouha immediately lifts a hand, brushing it a bit worriedly over his jaw before scowling at the other
man. "Gross, Mei. I'm never growing facial hair, I have way better taste than that."

“You can’t will it away,” Koumei points out, amused. “You can find a servant to shave you if you
want, that’s what I do. Don’t like being raspy, my skin can’t take it.”

"I'm not raspy! There's nothing even _there_ yet!” Kouha protests. "And don’t be dumb, you should
just let me shave you—I guarantee I'm better with a blade than all of your servants combined."

Koumei raises an eyebrow. “I’ve had a servant shaving me for ten years. If you had a blade in your
hand, I wouldn’t be able to sit still and let you shave me.” His eyes lid. “I’d be far too excited.”

"… Okay, fair enough," Kouha wryly agrees, and sighs, giving Koumei's ponytail a pull. "Still. I'm
not gonna grow _anything_. I'll will it away, no matter what you say. Magoi manipulation or
something.”

“Why don’t you want any? Maybe you’d be dashing with a full beard,” Koumei teases. “Especially
when you’re that short. Very striking.”

"I'm going to punch you and you aren't going to like it."
“Mmm, that’s not up to you,” Koumei says with a laugh. “You can punch me all you want, you can’t make me not like it.”

"Sometimes, you're creepy," Kouha complains, and reaches around to prod Koukei gently on the nose, which only makes her giggle. "Don't learn too much from your aunt, he's weeird."

“Stop calling me an aunt, I’m not a woman,” Koumei mutters. “I’m dumping her on you if she starts trying to nurse from me again.”

"Nope!" With that, Kouha gracefully steps around Koumei’s desk and out of reach. "I have to go prepare for a campaign."

Koumei picks Kei up, looking into her round little face. “Grow up to like swords,” he advises the little princess. “No one respects you if you….wow you’re heavy.” He lets her fall back to his lap, head rolling back.

"Twig," Kouha affectionately insults, and with that, all but bounces out of the study. If he has anything to do with it, Kou won't be just a country for that much longer.

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